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California Special Districts –  
Accountability, Composition, and Trends

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Political Science

by

Brett L. Savage

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2020



## **DEDICATION**

To

my mom, dad, and sister.

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## **ABSTRACT**

California Special Districts –  
Accountability, Composition, and Trends

by

Brett L. Savage

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Charles Anthony Smith, Chair

The most prevalent form of government in California (1,947) and the United States (38,266) are known as special districts, yet we know little about them. In California, the governing boards of special districts are either appointed or elected, which leads to the possibility of discrepancies in accountability and representation due to the differential selection methods of board directors. Furthermore, are special districts being used as a kind of shallow end of the pool in politics to help start one's career in public office or a type of resting place where seasoned local politicians continue to make public policy? Historical migration trends, partisanship, political participation, and economic variables were analyzed to test the pervasiveness of special districts. Twenty-five in-depth, elite interviews, an original data set, surveys, and statistical analyses aided the accumulation of new insights and knowledge of special districts. The results demonstrate that the principal-agent relationship between elected board directors and voters is strong, while the majority of appointed board directors deviate from the classical theory by stating their sense of accountability lies with the organization and citizens rather than the person(s) responsible for their appointment. Special districts are regularly being

utilized by both experienced local officials and zealous political newcomers who seek to run for higher office—particularly city council. The study concludes by presenting that the effect of historical migration in the U.S. had a significant impact on the establishment and creation of special districts in California, while the effects of partisanship preference and economic factors were moderate. The findings perpetuated from this inquiry allow for the improvement of democratic practices, increase of accountability, and increase of overall knowledge regarding special districts. As special districts remain the most abundant form of government throughout California and the U.S. and are frequently employed as a means of government to provide public services to residents, it is vital to continue researching their effects on representation, efficiency, and growth.

## INTRODUCTION

This study sought to explore in depth several aspects of California special districts, including accountability, composition, and trends. It was projected that the knowledge produced from this inquiry would afford new insights and understandings to inform the public, researchers, and local government practitioners about the characteristics, complexities, and common practices emanating from special districts. This research study utilized quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches to illustrate the many different facets and effects special districts generate while serving as the most abundant form of government in California. Participants in this study encompass a variety of personal characteristics including different races and ethnicities, genders, ages, and residencies, culminating in 25 in-depth interviews from special district board directors throughout California. An original dataset was also created in order to investigate the prevalence and clustering of special districts through various statistical analyses. Lastly, a survey was circulated to 430 currently serving California special district board directors to aid in the examination of political experience, ambitions, and demographics. The results from this original research will further our comprehension of the prominence of special districts, voting behavior, and representation at the most local level of governance.

What is a special district? Typically, many residents have a high probability of living within the boundaries of, or receiving benefits originating from, a special district. Yet many people know very little about special districts, who operates them, what they pay in taxes or fees to fund them, and how one comes into existence. California has an estimated 1,947 (2019) independent special districts—many with the authority and jurisdiction to raise and collect property taxes, send monthly bills, and have the voters cast ballots in favor of candidate(s) they probably have never heard of during an election. Usually, it is the state’s 482 cities and 58

counties that draw in all of the media and public attention with their boisterous, divisive issues and contentious political campaigning. But it is the discreet, often overlooked special districts where much of the heavy lifting and local governing of California gets done.

More commonly known by their district type, such as “fire protection” districts or “water” districts, special districts deliver specific public services to their communities. Unlike municipalities or general-purpose governments, special districts are “special” for the reason that they provide a “specialized” service when the community is in need. Districts are solely responsible for providing a single service, and often proponents of special districts argue that this focused service leads to efficiency and effectiveness, but the validity of these claims have yet to be proven and continue to be debated amongst researchers. Special districts operate independently from local governments, such as within counties and municipalities, allowing them to provide a single public service such as fire protection, sanitation, library, cemetery, water, or recreation and parks, among others, with substantial administrative and fiscal independence. A formal definition of a special district is “any agency of the state for the local performance of governmental or proprietary functions within limited boundaries” (U.S. Census Bureau Governments, 2012). In layman terms, this means a special district is a separate government entity at the local level that helps provide public services to citizens in a certain geographic area.

Special districts are publicly owned and operated, while special district board directors are either appointed or elected. Special districts are governed by a board of directors, which is responsible for providing strategic leadership, policy and direction, and fiscal oversight for the district. The size of the special district governing board can range from as small as a 3-person cemetery district board to as large as a 20-person mosquito and vector control district board. It

was not the differences amid the various sizes of special district boards but the discrepancy between the two selection methods of the board directors that drew interest. The purpose of this case study was to explore and investigate the principal-agent relationships taking place between appointed and elected California special district board directors and their presumed principals, the person(s) who conferred their appointments and the voters. It was anticipated that through a better understanding of the motives and accountability perspectives between appointed and elected special district board directors, we could unveil the differences and similarities between these two groups. By way of collecting detailed personal accounts, the case study sought to describe how residents become involved with both appointed and elected special district boards. Along with other distinguishing peculiarities between the two groups of appointed and elected, the main finding focused on accountability, as each group was theoretically beholden to two different principal groups: the voters that elected them, or the city council or county board of supervisors that appointed them.

Political experience, ambition, and trajectories have been the study of many well-known political science scholars such as Matthews, Canon, Francis, and Kenny. Special districts are often overlooked by researchers even though they are abundant in information pertaining to other fields of study such as voting behavior, decision making, and public policy. Much of the research regarding pre- and post-political careers and trajectories focuses on congressional careers. Meanwhile, there is no known research in relation to special district political career trajectories. Special district governing boards embody a diverse group of individuals ranging from 19 to 85 years of age, which means they attain various levels of political experience and different career plans. Special districts can either be seen as a potential starting point for some and a final resting point for others. This study wanted to explore whether special districts act as a type of shallow

end of the pool of politics for novice politicians wanting to get their feet wet during the onset of their political careers. Special districts may also serve as a final resting place for experienced local politicians who have served their communities in a multitude of different capacities and wish to continue serving as they reach retirement age and later stages of life. Both of these two scenarios are probable and analyzed through data collection and interviews.

With 482 municipalities in California and 19,495 incorporated cities and towns in the United States, special districts are the most widespread form of governance in California and the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau Governments, 2012). Nationally, the proliferation of special districts is increasing, totaling 38,266 (U.S. Census Bureau Governments, 2012). However, in California the number of special districts peaked in 1997, went through a period of leveling off, and has since begun to decline marginally. As of 2012, California has approximately 1,947 independent special districts. California has been creating and establishing special districts throughout the variety of different communities in the state since 1887 with the passage of the Wright Act. It is the high frequency rates at which special districts are being utilized amongst extremely diverse communities that sparked the inquiry into where and what type of community characteristics are present where special districts are being created and used. The inquiry of this study originated from questioning whether certain ideological and partisan preferences of California counties might influence a county to create more or less special districts. As the study grew, more variables started to become evident, such as the various economic variables interwoven with special districts, which necessitated observation and testing to determine other alternative explanations as to where higher frequencies of special districts are found. The political and economic variables were systematically tested by way of quantitative methodological approaches. The results of this study will hopefully offer new understandings into where special districts

regularly operate and become established. A supplementary statistical analysis was employed to test a general expectation regarding special districts at the national level by keeping the population of states constant and evaluating each state’s partisan disposition and determining whether it affects the number of special districts in the state. The requirements and steps needed to establish a special district differs by state. Please see Figure 1.1 for the establishment procedures and requirements for California special districts.

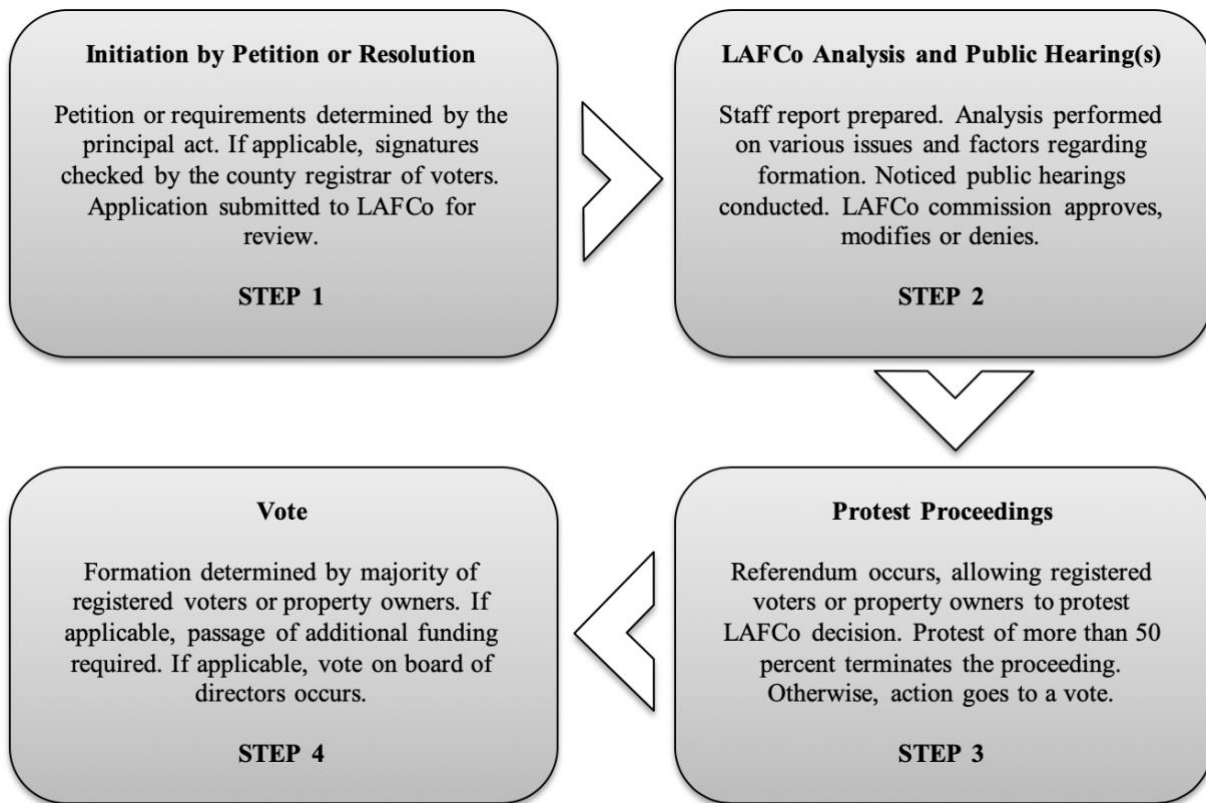


Figure 1.1 Flow Chart of Special District Formation Process

The rationale for this study stems from the researcher’s desire to uncover innumerable findings pertaining to a subject matter that is paid little attention to but affects millions daily. The findings perpetuated from this inquiry allow for the improvement of democratic practices,

increase of accountability, and increase of overall knowledge regarding special districts. While the research design was vetted, it does not mean that it is without its shortcomings. It was the intention of this research to set out and initiate a conversation regarding special districts and hopefully spur future exploration and investigation into the numerous effects special districts have on their residents.



## CHAPTER 1

Appointed vs. Elected:

Accountability, Representation, and Decision Making

## ***Introduction***

Representative government can take a variety of different forms, and countless scholars, politicians, and activists have tried to ascertain and debate which form is the “most” democratic. Winston Churchill articulated, “Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” (House of Commons, 1947). Each of the different forms of government has its own assets and liabilities and can be argued as the “most” democratic type of representative government. California has approximately 1,947 (2019) independent special districts, totaling more than the number of local municipalities throughout the state. This makes special districts the most prevalent type of government in California, yet there are inconsistencies in how Californians select their special district representatives.

The formal definition of a special district is “any agency of the state for the local performance of governmental or proprietary functions within limited boundaries” (U.S. Census Bureau Governments, 2012). Special districts offer an array of public services including fire protection, water, libraries, sanitation, mosquito abatement, healthcare, and many other public goods. There are two different forms of representation within special districts: appointed or elected board directors. The pathways of becoming a representative on a special district governing board are contingent on how the special district was initially established. Approximately 350 independent special districts in California have an appointed board of directors. While a majority of special districts have governing boards resulting from local elections, a substantial amount (18%) of special districts have their representatives derived from appointments stemming from local city council member(s) or county board supervisor(s). The

selection method of special district board directors is not consistent, meaning the representatives who serve on governing boards are operating under two different principal-agent relationships. The apparent discrepancy between the selection processes of special district board directors sparked an inquiry into representation, principal-agent issues, and accountability within special districts.

Hanna Pitkin's seminal book, *The Concept of Representation*, offered an important and lasting contribution to political philosophy and to the concept of political representation. This classic discussion is one of the most significant and often cited works in the literature on political representation. Pitkin (1967) asserts that representation is a paradox for the reason that representation is "the making present of something which is nevertheless not literally present." The paradox rests in the idea that representation necessitates both being present and not being present. Pitkin explains that the paradox is most apparent in the activity of representation; representatives should be responsive to their constituents' preferences (constituents' preferences present) and act in accordance with their constituents' best interests (constituents' preferences not present). Pitkin composed four different models of representation while deeming the concept of representation as still a paradox. Formalistic representation considers how a representative comes to obtain their standing, status, position, or office, along with the institutional mechanisms that boost responsiveness to the represented. Descriptive representation focuses on whether representatives' experiences, identities, perspectives, and interests are similar to those of the represented. Symbolic representation encompasses the ways in which a representative "stands for" the represented with an emphasis on symbols and symbolism. Pitkin states that what matters is whether a person feels represented. Finally, Pitkin considers substantive representation to be the most important dimension of representation. Substantive representation refers to the behavior

of acting on behalf of, in the interest of, as an agent of, or as a substitute for the represented.

Pitkin reiterates that these four different dimensions are integral parts of a coherent whole. Pitkin (1967) holds that appropriate standards for evaluating representation will depend importantly on the nature of interests, welfare, and wishes of the represented, the relative capacities of representatives and constituents, and the nature of the issues with which the representative must work.

Other scholars (Mishler and Mughan 1978; Mash and Norris 1997; Mansbridge 2003; and Rehfeld 2011) have continued the discussion pertaining to the efficacy and contexts of representation in democratic societies. Similar to Pitkin, Mansbridge presents four distinct forms of representation: promissory, anticipatory, gyroscopic, and surrogate. In reality, representative behavior tends to mix several of these forms, but do certain institutional forces and mechanisms increase the likelihood of representatives to display certain behaviors? Congressional scholar David Mayhew (1974) argues that elected officials (Congress) are single-minded seekers in pursuit of securing reelection. Observing Mayhew's rational choice theory, we would expect a departure in decision-making, accountability, and representation between special district representatives that are appointed versus elected. Elected special district representatives must seek the approval of voters to secure their position, while appointed special district representatives are insulated from public pressure and owe their position to the city council or county board of supervisors who approved their appointment. The assortments of special districts (fire protection, cemetery, water, sanitation, harbor, library, etc.) all have similar powers granted to them under California law, but the selection methods of its governing board are contrasting and require exploration of their possible effects on accountability, decision making, and representation.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section, I place the literature review, where the history of special districts, the theoretical and methodological advances in the study of special districts, principal-agent issues, accountability, and representation are discussed. In the second section, I present the methodological approaches and framework that is employed. I present my variables and the data that was used during the empirical analysis. A mixed methods approach enhanced the validity of the project by having the quantitative aspects complemented by the qualitative contributions. Twenty-five in-depth elite interviews were conducted with special district representatives throughout the state, including appointed and elected representatives from a variety of special districts. Then I present the results and discuss the possible ramifications between having appointed or elected special district representatives. Later I consider the possible causes of why we see such a discrepancy in representation between the different types of special district boards in California. The figures are provided to augment the results from the statistical analysis. The last section concludes and discusses further areas of research that could be studied with respect to special districts, decision-making, and representation for local government.

### ***Literature Review***

The Principal-Agent Theory as it applies to the U.S. government is a complicated and often convoluted mixture of pure theory and practical application. The principal-agent situation, interaction, relation etc. takes place when one person (an elected special district board member), acting as the agent, is empowered to decide or take action for another person (in this case the public or the voters), acting as the principal. Similarly, the principal can be an elected official who appoints an individual (agent) to a governmental board, who in theory will act as the agent

and implement the policy wishes on behalf of the principal (elected official). These types of structures are the basis for the representative form of government that operates in the United States. Principal-agent relationships are common throughout the U.S. governmental structures, from members of Congress acting as agents in relationship to their voters as their principal, or federal bureaucracies or bureaucrats operating as agents with Congress representing the principal. The relationship in theory follows the logic that the voter (principal) allows their representatives in Congress (agent) to make decisions on their behalf based upon the voter's wishes, which are expressed to the member of Congress by casted votes or direct communication with the Congress member. Where this relationship often goes awry is when the agent takes the initiative to make decisions based on their own self-interest instead of the will of the principals (the people). There is also the conflict that arises when the agent is forced to serve both the principals and higher political authorities. Modern political science literature debates both of these issues and tries to define how to handle both situations.

Congressional scholars, legal theorists, and economists have all researched and analyzed how rational actors can control the actions and behavior of agents to whom they delegate authority. Congressional studies have mainly examined the relation between floor voters and committee members (Krehibiell 1991; Cox and McCubbins 1993). While administrative law focuses on the procedural mechanisms that limit bureaucratic decision-making (Mashaw 1990), economic theorists view the principal-agent issue via firms' hierarchical relationships among owners, managers, and workers (Alchian and Demsetz 1972; Holmstrom 1979; Miller 1992). Broadly speaking, this literature underlines the impracticality and even undesirability of complete control stemming from problems such as monitoring costs, asymmetric information, and inherent uncertainty about future circumstances.

Sean Gailmard, in his 2012 article, “Accountability and Principal-Agent Models,” begins the discussion by pointing out that the principal-agent theory “encapsulates a tradition of rational choice modeling, in which some actor(s) (the principal(s)) uses whatever actions are available, to provide incentives for some other actor(s) (the agent(s)) to make decisions that the principal most prefers.” In order to apply this statement to the relationship between voters and elected officials, the agents (members of Congress) are mandated to do everything they can to please the principals (the voters or electorate) by passing legislation and promoting policies that positively affect their constituents. However, in the political realm, compromises that derail promises made by the agents to the principals sometimes have to be made. Gailmard also discusses the fact that the principal-agent relationship does not encapsulate a “single overarching theory with a specific set of assumptions or conclusions” but “a family of formal models addressing related concerns with similar styles of analysis” (3). Therefore, it is likely that these descriptions can sometimes contradict one another.

In similar fashion, Richard Katz points to another aspect of the principal-agent relationship that complicates the simplistic description presented above. Katz (2014) notes that sometimes in the world of modern American political discourse, the agent can be forced to choose between two principals, which upsets the classic principal-agent theoretical affiliation. These two principals are the electorate to whom the agent owes their position and the Executive branch, who is also a principal to the agent of the members of Congress because they also have an agenda that they must push Congress to enact. This reality is much more pronounced than it has been in the past because the principal-agent theory is an “obvious oversimplification” of the way the U.S. government operates on a daily basis (Katz, 2014). Katz also points out that the theory of a unified principal, meaning a public that is not factionalized and has one overriding

goal for the agents, is more of a myth in modern society than something that can be practically obtained. The principal-agent theory in today's society is often more like the ideas put forth by Anthony Downs in 1957, which defines parties not as groups of citizens who select their agents (representatives) based on established norms, but as the agent groups that vie for the support of the principals (Katz, 2014). In other words, the definition of party structures has flipped from being associations of citizens to being groups of politicians that compete for the right to represent the people.

In the modern definition of the principal-agent theory, there is also an overlay of what is known as “artificial information symmetry” where agents, in the absence of specific directives from the principals, often act on good faith but are later made scapegoats by the principals when the policy falls short (Poth and Selck, 2009). In other words, as stated by Mitchell, “This political technique of the principal, in which he knows but finds it convenient to conceal his knowledge, in which he is in control but pretends not to be, might be called artificial information asymmetry” (Poth and Selck, 2009). In modern jargon, this method is referred to as “scapegoating,” where an agent who has the power to effect change or institute the policies that the principals want blames another entity for blocking the way to success and obstructing the agent (Poth and Selck, 2009). Scapegoating is regularly employed and seems to be a fixed notion in the political world when something goes wrong. Another aspect that shapes the principal-agent relationship is the control, which Congress exerts over the bureaucracies spread throughout the federal government structure. As Poth and Selck maintain in *Principal-Agent Theory and Artificial Information Asymmetry*, applying artificial information symmetry to the control Congress has over the bureaucracies brings into question the unavoidable causality this process has in comparison to the absence of control often quoted by other scholars such as Barry



Weingast and Mark Moran (Pooh and Selck, 2009). Pooh and Selck maintain that the application of artificial information symmetry does not operate solely because of lack of control.

The theme of congressional oversight-at-a-distance was also the subject of McCubbins and Schwartz (1984), who analyzed the mechanics of how a fairly less-informed Congress could possibly control bureaucrats who were more likely to be better informed and knowledgeable about certain specific policy areas. It is possible for members of Congress to pursue a strategy where they gather their own information about a particular policy to force the agent to disclose information at oversight hearings known as “police patrol oversight.” However, to complete such a task would require an immense amount of time, money, and effort. Members of Congress have a limited amount of time to dedicate to overseeing the bureaucracy and little desire to use their resources in this manner. However, members of Congress have access to low transaction cost information stemming from interest groups affected by the bureaucratic agency’s policy decisions. These interest groups tend to be well-informed about the pertinent policy issue areas and are more than willing to share their information and knowledge with their representatives if the agency is not acting in accordance with their interests. Consequently, members of Congress can regulate and control bureaucratic agencies by allowing these interest groups to act as watchdogs and inform them with complaints if something goes awry—a strategy known as “fire alarm oversight”. As Weingast and Moran stated, if the fire alarm protocol works flawlessly, then bureaucratic agencies will never work contrary to the preferences of their principals, and no fire alarm will actually be alerted.

McCubbins and Lupia readdress the issues facing police and fire alarm oversight and the consequences of delegation in their article “Learning from Oversight: Fire Alarms and Police Patrols Reconstructed.” They join the robust debate taking place as scholars who argue that the

presence of bureaucratic proficiency is adequate to make delegation and abdication equivalent (Lowi, 1979; Huntington, 1965; Niskanen, 1971; and Weber, in Gerth and Mills, 1946).

Conversely, other scholars argue that legislative oversight, administration procedure, and budgeting are proficient to moderate the potentially adverse effects of delegation (see, e.g., Harris, 1964; Fiorina, 1977; Weingast and Moran 1983; McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast, 1987; and Kiewiet and McCubbins, 1991). The literature regarding this debate have alleged that Congress's comprehensive authority when it comes to delegations of policy-making discretion to the bureaucracy in this century have ushered in an era of congressional relinquishment of power. The main culprit of this phenomenon is hidden knowledge. Bureaucrats have information that legislators do not have: information that is necessary for producing or assessing policy.

McCubbins and Lupia put forth two conditions under which learning from fire alarm oversight can occur: (1) penalties for lying and (2) a perceived similarity of preferences between fire alarms and members of Congress (1997). "If both of these conditions are weak or absent, and if police patrol oversight is too expensive to be practical, then delegation will be equivalent to abdication," according to McCubbins and Lupia (1997). If not, members of Congress can learn from fire alarms and oversee the activities of their bureaucratic agents.

There is considerable push-pull going on in the principal-agent relationship when one considers that both "slippage and bias" exists between the public and their elected officials (Krause, 2013). This part of Krause's theory of the relationship between the polity and the elected officials shows that theory is not always put into strict practice. Politicians are sometimes motivated, according to Krause (2013), by the forces of "partisan, ideological, or policy goals that may not coincide with those of their constituents." This issue also comes into play between politicians and bureaucrats, both of which serve their principals in a specific capacity.

Sometimes, according to the Madisonian “precept of managerial responsibility,” bureaucrats are often more finely tuned into what the principals want and need than are the politicians as agents of the people (Krause, 2013). However, conforming strictly to theory is sometimes structurally impossible in today’s American political system.

John Huber and Charles Shipan address the issues faced by principals and their agents in their book *Deliberate Discretion? The Institutional Foundations of Bureaucratic Autonomy*. Their attention focuses on the delegation and authority in which bureaucracies, as agents, can be given leeway or constraints by their principals in the legislatures. Huber and Shipan (2002) argue that high levels of political conflict between bureaucrats and legislators, who are supposed to execute the desires of the chief executive, lead legislators to want more restraints on bureaucratic discretion. However, the transaction costs of accomplishing such a task requires a tremendous amount of effort, which most legislators do not have the time or high enough levels of expertise to solve. Agents tend to have considerable amount of leeway in regard to policymaking and interpretation of legislation due to the constraints and effort that must be put forth by their principals to overcome such problems with delegation. Huber and Shipman articulate that policy conflict (divided government) leads to lengthier legislation, but this effect is moderated by a scarcity of legislative capacity, disagreement among the legislative chambers, and the presence of a legislative veto that otherwise checks agency discretion. Appointed special district board members do not have to work with an entire legislature as a guiding principal, but with one individual who oversees their decisions with concern to policy discretions. In theory, the principal who appoints a special district board member has the ability and fortune of having lower transaction costs when overseeing their appointee in comparison to overseeing an entire bicameral legislature.

*The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy* by Daniel Carpenter gives insight into the rich history of bureaucracies and how their strength within the principal-agent dilemma has evolved over time. Carpenter explains that bureaucrats acquired autonomy and enlarged the mission of their agencies by entrenching themselves into large networks of multiple organizations and individuals that encompassed a multitude of social, economic, and ethnic arenas (Carpenter, 1967). Carpenter illustrates through history the emergence of an administrative state where bureaucracies obtain substantial independence from their principals (politicians), a feature that he argues was not present in “the clerical state” of the nineteenth century where the “national bureaucracy was assigned and delegated distributive tasks fit only for organizations of mediocre talent and routinized duties” (Carpenter, 1967). Bureaucrats had to prove that their agencies provided a service that was special, and that they maintained connections to pertinent networks. Carpenter provides an example of bureaucrats gaining strength and control to contest powerful Speaker Joseph Cannon when he was outflanked by Gifford Pinchot, chief forester in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Un-elected bureaucrats have the capability of establishing agendas, contouring the composition of the long-term work force in their organizations, limiting the amount information given to Congress, and essentially persuading elected officials to approve their programs and agendas. Special districts boards that have appointed board members have the ability to control information, which allows them to have these very same powers as stated above over their principals. A cohesive special district board with appointed board members would theoretically have the largest amount of power in contrast to their principals, whereas a divided board would have limited leverage. A divided board runs the risk of having individual board members leak information to the principals, making the board of agents less capable of putting forth their own agendas.

It should be noted that within the discussion of principal-agent interactions, there are important distinctions that must be made. “Congruence” is the level to which agents adhere to the demands of the principals, and “responsiveness” is the level to which agents adjust their actions as the demands of the principals change. Agents sometimes have quite a bit of room for discretionary action or “shirking” (where the demands of the principal are not adhered to), yet at the same time might be relatively responsive to changes in the demands of principals. A metaphor can be given to demonstrate these types of relationships between principals and their agents. The relationship is similar to that of a person and their dog on a walk. The dog on a leash has the ability to follow or lead the owner who is walking with them. The dog’s position is not congruent with that of the owner, but the degree of incongruence is constrained by the length of the leash decided by the owner. If the owner (principal) deviates from the set path and tugs on the leash, the dog (agent) follows, as it is responsive to changes in the owner’s walking path.

### ***Methodology***

Many Californians live within the boundaries of a special district, may that be fire protection, sanitation, water, cemetery, or any other type of single service public district. These special districts levy taxes, accumulating millions of dollars from the residents living within the districts’ confines so that they may be able to provide the public with the specific service. The tax revenue raised by the special district is given to the board of directors, which is the governing body responsible for allocating the funds necessary to perform the special services to the public. The board of directors of a special district has the fiduciary responsibility of apportioning the tax revenue, but the selection process of the governing board is not congruent throughout the state or the type of special district (e.g., fire protection, library, harbor, mosquito abatement, etc.). The

board of directors of an independent special district can either be appointed or elected, which theoretically establishes a foundation for differences in the actions taken by the board as well as ultimately determines whom the board of directors feels accountable to. A full-bodied qualitative approach consisting of in-depth elite interviews with special district board directors provided a great deal of information in regard to the decision-making practices, accountability, and representation of both appointed and elected special district representatives.

Social scientists have utilized interviews to study an array of social and political actors. It has been suggested that 90% of all social science inquiries make use of some sort of interview data (Brenner, Brown and Canter 1985). Even though the trends of contemporary published articles rely heavily on quantitative practices, much can still be gained from employing comprehensive qualitative methods, such as interviewing pertinent subjects. In political science, there have been numerous popular works such as Richard Fenno's *Home Style* (1978) that have demonstrated that 'soaking and poking' via in-depth one-on-one interviews can generate insights and new findings that are otherwise unavailable. I argue that interviewing board directors from special districts is an effective way to study decision-making, accountability, and representation. Drawing upon my experience of interviewing 25 currently serving special district board directors, I am able to provide detailed insights into the practices of the governing boards of special districts in California.

There are approximately 1,947 independent special districts in California, and if there are an average of 5 board of directors on each governing board, there are nearly 10,000 board directors in California. I had previously reached out to the California Special District Association (CSDA), the chief advocacy group for special district interests, for their direct assistance in this project. They are the only statewide association representing special districts providing legal

advice, legislative advocacy, and information crucial to special district management. Being a special district board director myself (Vice President, Apple Valley Fire Protection District), I was able to gain access to data that is only available to CSDA members, as the Apple Valley Fire Protection District (AVFPD) is currently a CSDA member. The CSDA is not an exhaustive association including every independent special district in California; instead, special districts must opt to join the association and pay an annual fee based on an operating cost ranging from \$177 – \$7,252 to acquire member benefits. The AVFPD 2019 membership dues to the CSDA cost \$7,252. There are approximately 2,000 independent special districts that are members of the CSDA. I reached out to the executive staff of the CSDA to inform them of my research and ask for their assistance with the project, including their support and access to their email list of currently serving board directors. The CSDA executive staff expressed that they did not want to share their comprehensive email list, which they use daily to send out news articles, promotions, and other information, for the purpose of an academic study.

Being that the CSDA did not cooperate with my desire to make use of their comprehensive email list of currently serving special district board directors, I opted to compose my own independent contact list. As a member of the CSDA I have access to the member directory that provides data inaccessible to the public, including the main phone number for the special district along with their website URL. I was able to compile my own original dataset with this limited information by visiting each special district website and acquiring the respective board director's email address. The original dataset was created from visiting roughly 430 individual special district websites, culminating in hundreds of email addresses of representatives that sit on California special districts.

The sample from which the interviews would be conducted began with two distinct groups of subjects: appointed and elected special district representatives. The original dataset included contact information from a collection of different types of special districts including the following: mosquito and vector control, cemetery, harbor, healthcare, irrigation, library, sanitation, fire, utility, recreation and parks, and water. The breadth of the diverse types of special districts allowed for a more representative sample for the study. There were 25 interviews conducted with participants representing various types of special districts that included mosquito and vector control, water, fire, cemetery, library and healthcare. Due to the target populations necessitating a certain set of prerequisites and the sheer difficulty of obtaining an interview with a sitting special district board member, selecting the interview sample of subjects to be interviewed was conducted with non-random sampling. A purposive sampling, often referred to as judgment sampling, was utilized because it does not call for an exhaustive census of every element in the population. Instead, purposive sampling allows for the selection of specific characteristics and elements deemed pertinent to the analysis. In this case, there were a few factors that negated the use of a non-random purposive sampling. First, the sheer number of appointed independent special district representatives is fewer than their elected counterparts. Second, within California's vast independent special district system, there are certain types of special districts that favor a particular governing structure, whether that be appointed or elected. For instance, mosquito and vector control and cemetery districts seem to be solely governed by appointed governing boards. On the other end of the spectrum, special district types such as irrigation and sanitation make use of only elected governing boards. Barring those exceptions, all other types of special districts in California (fire, harbor, water, recreation and parks, utility, library, and hospital) have a mixture of both appointed and elected governing boards.



A comparable cases strategy was employed, as it seemed to offer the best methodological approach to investigate the differences between the two types of selection processes of the governing board structures. A comparable cases strategy targets the causal effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable and thus assumes that the independent variable demonstrates a causal power that works in a uniform way within a certain population of similar cases and that works independently of the causal power of other variables (Blatter & Haverland, 2016). Making use of the comparable cases strategy within the study of special districts, the independent variable is the type of selection for the governing board (appointed or elected). The dependent variable in the study is whom the special district board member feels accountable to. This methodological practice tried to select cases in such a way that it was possible to hold constant all other possible variables of influence, so that the formal logic and variation of the independent variable and dependent variable values across cases operated as a solid ground for drawing causal inferences for cases with similar scope and elements (Blatter & Haverland, 2016). As with most research endeavors, the researcher must try to diminish the amount of biases and make use of methodological practices by having a representative sample, high quality information, and accurate reporting.

Qualitative political scientists can benefit from a shared set of standards for reporting the reliability of their data so that readers, reviewers, and others in the field of political science can judge the value of their evidence (Mosley, 2013). With any research, no matter the field of study, it is nearly impossible for qualitative researchers to attain complete reliability. This is why manufacturers and consumers of qualitative research benefit from being more cognizant in regard to the methodological tactics of interviewing and from being transparent about reporting uncertainty. The two select groups for observation and interviews are either individuals who

have been appointed to an independent special district governing board or elected to an independent special district governing board. As previously mentioned, there are four types of independent special districts which only have a single type of selection process for their governing boards, while all other special districts have a combination of both appointed and elected selection processes. This indicates that mosquito and vector control and cemetery special districts in California are only represented by appointed governing boards. In contrast, irrigation and sanitation special districts only select their governing boards via elections. Establishing a representative sample is imperative for the validity of the research endeavor. The interviews conducted included participants from diverse backgrounds, age groups, genders, ethnicities, geographic locations, and types of special districts. Fire, water, cemetery, harbor, library, irrigation, and mosquito and vector control special districts had governing board directors' representative in the sample of interviews conducted. Utility, recreation and parks, and sanitation were not represented in the sampling of interviews. Multiple attempts (10 contacts) were made to try and obtain access for interviews from district board members representing utility, recreation and parks, and sanitation special districts, but to no avail. The board directors of these special districts denied or did not respond to the requests to participate in the interview.

The second possible issue when pursuing a qualitative methodological approach revolves around the type and quality of information obtained. Interviews may not produce accurate information, no matter the number of interviews completed or what variety type was conducted. One form of measurement error can stem from the interviewee who may not transmit accurate information, possibly because they are ill-informed. Furthermore, the interviewee may be insincere and intentionally deceive the interviewer to help their reputation, provide the "correct" response (what the interviewee believes the interviewer or public wants to hear), or for other

purposes unbeknownst to the interviewer (social desirability bias). Alternatively, the interviewer may not be skillful or have the knowledge to ask the right questions or comprehend what the interviewee is trying to communicate, causing a form of coding error. Additionally, and unethically, the interviewer could deliberately misinterpret the information given to them and thus falsely provide it as evidence. As humans, we inherently have biases that can fester in the research projects being conducted, and such biases must be transmitted or avoided at all costs. The research techniques employed with the special district board directors were semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow for closed- and open-ended questions that are conducted as an interview but permit the conversation to be fluid. Spradley (1979) advocated for the use of “grand tour questions,” and as the term indicates, the researcher provides questions to the interviewee so that they can respond by way of a verbal tour, allowing more information to be transmitted. Examples of grand tour questions utilized when interviewing special district board directors include the following: What are your processes and considerations when a policy decision is presented to the special district board? What was the story behind your appointment to the special district board? What was the story behind your decision to run for a seat on the special district board? This is not an exhaustive list of questions used throughout the interview process. With the written consent of the interviewee, an audio recording device was used during the interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted via phone calls, except for two interviews that were conducted in person. The average length of time the interviews lasted was approximately 35 minutes. The interview length ranged from 18 minutes to 55 minutes.

The last point of caution is that a qualitative researcher must be cognizant of issues with the accuracy of reporting. Once a researcher has articulated to its audience that they have provided a representative sample and have conducted the interviews in a serious and unbiased

manner, they face the undertaking of convincing observers that their reports on the selected material reflect the truth of the situation. One solution to this problem with accuracy and reporting can be to post the full interview transcripts, with no redactions, on a website or within the researcher's paper. This is an ideal circumstance, but for this to take place, the interviewee would need to consent to this procedure. By consenting, the interviewee is likely to become fearful and possibly not provide honest and genuine responses to the interview questions being presented. Because the interviews were being conducted mostly with sitting special district board directors, this solution could not be employed on the high likelihood that the interviewee responses would be skewed and not reflective of their true feelings and thoughts. The current board directors (appointed and elected) could face negative implications, such as removal from office or other forms of dissatisfaction, from their responses being reported directly in the research paper or publicized through another method, such as being posted on a website. However, it is still possible to communicate the accuracy of the reported interview without posting the transcripts in its entirety by conveying that the vast majority of interviewees agree, not absolutely but mostly, on a particular point. Direct quotations from the interviewees are used as supporting evidence, but not by way of cherry-picking select points as a way to skew the representativeness. Quotations placed within the text will be accompanied by a remark deeming the interviewee's response as representative of the typical intensity and direction of other respondents' reactions or characteristic of the extreme end of the spectrum of responses. All interviewees who participated in an interview consented to an audio recording, but within the consent form was language articulating that a deletion of recordings would be conducted once the project was completed, and that interviewees' identities would be kept private.

## ***Results***

The purpose of this case study was to explore and investigate the principal-agent relationships taking place between appointed and elected California special district board directors. The research conducted will hopefully give a better understanding between the types of relationships of local politicians and the agents they serve depending on the selection method of how one becomes a special district board member (appointment or election). This section presents the key findings obtained from 25 in-depth interviews with participants representing various types of special districts that included fire protection, water, mosquito and vector control, cemetery, library, and healthcare.

Finding #1 addressed the first research question, which asked: What were the processes and procedures leading to one's appointment as a special distinct board member? Finding #2 addressed the second research question, which asked: Do appointed special district board members communicate regularly with the individual(s) who gave them their appointment? Finding #3 addressed both appointed and elected special district board directors, which asked the third research question: What tends to be the most contentious issue for a special district board? Are the voting behaviors between the two types of boards similar or different? Finding #4 addressed the fourth research question, which asked: How do the agents (appointed and elected special district board directors) interact with their principals? Finding #5 addressed the final research question, which asked: Is there variation in the levels of public participation between an elected and appointed special district board meeting? The findings of this qualitative case study address the research question of whether the selection method (appointment or election) of special district board directors impacts their decision making, accountability, and representation. Five major findings emerged from this study.

1. Recruitment: Appointed special district board directors are often approached by politically active local leaders and asked if they would be willing to serve on the special district board.
2. Weak communication: Appointed special district members do not communicate regularly (at least every other month) with the city council member(s) (principals) who appointed them to their special district board.
3. Leadership: For both appointed and elected special district board directors, the most critical and contentious issue involves the selection of district leadership (e.g., fire chief, port director, executive director, general manager, district manager, etc.).
- 4a. Weak principal: In contrast to the classical principal-agent relationship theory, a majority of appointed members profess they feel accountable to the residents who receive the public service or to the special district organization and not to the city council member(s) or county board of supervisors that appointed them to the special district board.
- 4b. Strong principal: On the other hand, the principal-agent relationship between elected special district board directors and the voters is strong.
5. Uniform low public participation: There is no significant difference in the levels of public participation between appointed and elected special district boards. The overall public participation remains low

### ***Discussion***

Following is a discussion of the findings with the details that support and describe them, illustrating the ways in which each finding offers a response to the study's research inquiries. By

way of “thick description” (Denzin, 2001; Geertz, 1973), the research conducted set out to document a wide range of experiences, and thus offer an opportunity to the reader to better comprehend the reality of the research participants. The importance throughout the research process is on letting participants express for themselves what it is like to be a California special district board director. Illustrative quotations taken from interview transcripts strive to portray multiple participant perspectives and capture some of the robustness and complexity of the subject matter.

**Finding 1:** *Appointed special district board directors are often approached by politically active local leaders and asked if they would be willing to serve on the special district board.*

The genesis of how one becomes an appointed special district board director is often overlooked, yet it is critical to the understanding of accountability within the organizational structure of a special district. Elected special district board directors have numerous election documents that they must submit to their local county registrar of voters department prior to their candidacy in order to be in compliance with federal, state, and local election laws. Conversely, how an appointed board director obtains the very same seat, authority, and powers as an elected special district board director has yet to be discussed within the literature. Hence, the information acquired through 25 in-depth elite interviews offers substantial knowledge to the growing literature regarding special districts. Gathering information and details pertaining to the eventual appointment of an individual to a special district provides insight into the actions taking place behind the scenes within local politics, which are not available to the public. Based on participant descriptions, a noteworthy finding of this research question demonstrates that if a person seeks to receive an appointment to a special district board, the appointment received by

the individual is frequently by someone who already had an existing relationship with a city council member or a county board supervisor prior to the vacancy within the special district board.

Can you tell me the story behind your appointment to the special district board?  
(Brett)

I was at a social event where our supervisor was at, and he came up to me and asked 'Would you like to serve on the board?' and I said 'Sure, which one?' and he said 'cemetery,' and I said 'okay.' In a short time, I became the chair. We had to hit the road running. There's a California Association of Public Cemetery, and there are 256 public cemeteries in California and...162 California Association of Public Cemetery members operating 317 cemeteries. I started going to their meetings and got a copy of their health and safety codes...that's how I got on the board. (Participant 6, appointed)

I had been going to the city council meetings for a number of years to see what's going on, and I'd been on one of the appointed city committees prior to serving on the special district. The mayor at that time was my brother-in-law's business partner, and when the special district decided to expand to incorporate the entire county, San Bruno got included, and...each city appoints one representative. The mayor asked me if I would like to be appointed. (Participant 21, appointed)

Basically, I have a biology degree, but I spent my career in technology. It's been an adaptation for me for many years... Six years ago, we had an election for city council. Some people I knew won that election, and after they came on the council, they needed someone to volunteer for the mosquito district. I interviewed and got the position. (Participant 9, appointed)

I was involved with a few of the city council members throughout the years, both with my business as well as personal. I have been friends with one particular city council member for over ten years, and one evening at dinner I was asked by this city council member if I had any interests sitting on a special district. I did not know much about the special district, nor had I ever sat on a political board or knew what the responsibilities were. We talked some more as she explained the district and how many meetings I would have to attend. I told her that if she needed someone to sit on the board, I would be happy to serve a term and learn something new. (Participant 23, appointed)

I think because number one I was a sailor; number two I was on the council, so I was aware of the relationship between harbor and the city. I was appointed by the city council. (Participant 1, appointed)



Did you actively approach the city council or did the city council approach you?  
(Brett)

I was approached because of my background on the Coastal Commission. When I was on the council, we sort of appointed the individuals through the needs of the board district. (Participant 1, appointed)

More than half (8 out of 13) of the appointed participants made mention of having a prior or existing relationship with a city council member(s) or county board supervisor(s) preceding their appointment to a special district board. Many participants were approached directly by a city council member or county board supervisor. When posed with the same question, other appointed special district board directors who did not have an existing or prior relationship with a city council member or county board supervisor mentioned that they had come across information pertaining to a vacancy or opening for a special district board director position via newspapers, public bulletins, word of mouth, or even by way of a grand jury investigation of a special district.

Can you tell me the story behind your appointment to the special district board?  
(Brett)

The city put out a press release and announcements that they were accepting applications to serve on a number of commissions, so I submitted a simple application to serve on the harbor commission, had an interview, and they appointed me. (Participant 3, appointed)

Did you have any contact with the city council any time prior to that, or were you approached, or was it something that you wanted to get involved in? (Brett)

Not specifically related to harbor, but...I communicated with council members and city staff people on a regular basis in the county. I worked in the county for 30 years, so I've worked with a lot of people and know the elected ones...It was mostly because of a friend of mine who was in the harbor commission who was talking about how they needed help. (Participant 3, appointed)

Can you tell me the story behind your appointment to the special district board?  
(Brett)

It was pretty simple. Because of my work with the county in our local LAFCo, I became familiar with many people in the county, and they knew me. When I applied to work on the mosquito district, I felt like I could contribute with my understanding of LAFCo and operations to the mosquito district, who have had a...fraud problem. I went to an interview process, and two supervisors interviewed me, and I was appointed. (Participant 4, appointed)

Well I'm a lawyer and I'm retired, so I was looking for things to do, so I decided to serve on the county's civil grand jury and during my first year with grand jury, the district that I serve on now had a major problem. One of their employees stole \$1 million. She was the financial director. It was one of the board members that caught it. I was serving on the grand jury and...I looked to see whether or not Half Moon Bay had a representative. Certain districts are controlled by legislation that commands that each city in the district is represented, so I went to the city of Half Moon Bay—where I live now—and put in an application because they have not had a representative on board in three years. I interviewed with then mayor and they said they would appoint me. (Participant 7, appointed)

**Finding 2:** *Appointed special district members do not communicate regularly (at least every other month) with the city council member(s) or county board supervisor(s) (principals) who appointed them to their special district board.*

Once an appointment has been voted on and approved by a city council or county board of supervisors, the special district board director will attend regular monthly meetings where they will be responsible for district policies, management hiring, and budget evaluations. The appointed special district board director is acting as the agent during the monthly board meetings on behalf of the principal, the city council member, or county board supervisor. Understanding the intricacies and the various types of relationships that can transpire between the appointed special district board director and their principal is critical to our understanding of a special district governing board's establishment of new policies and their decision-making practices. The elite interviews permitted the participant to be authentic and freely share their experiences. The participants were informed that “communicating regularly” in this circumstance meant having some form of communication (email, phone call, text message, or in-person meeting) at least

every other month with the person that appointed them to the special district. Based on participant descriptions, a significant finding of this research question demonstrates that 9 out of 13 of appointed special district board directors do not communicate regularly with their principal who appointed them to their special district board.

How frequently are you in contact with the Board of Supervisors who appointed you to this district? (Brett)

We recently have been talking and we're trying to find someone who is of a younger age and possibly a woman that our board of supervisors can appoint to our board. The County Board of Supervisors has limitations. I was contacted by two of the County Board of Supervisors, and I've been helping, but the Chairman of the County Board of Supervisors was not cooperating, and I went to...tell the board members they were breaking the law. That chairman said he was 'gonna take me down.' (Participant 6, appointed)

And this is at the county level? (Brett)

It's a public cemetery district. The County Board of Supervisors was changed a few years ago because of the election. Every time there's a new supervisor, we invite them to meetings, and no one has ever come to our meetings. Therefore, you get people at our odds. (Participant 6, appointed)

So there's not much contact between you and the County Board of Supervisors about what are you are doing? (Brett)

No. They don't care. (Participant 6, appointed)

Do you talk about policies that you're going to pass or not pass with the County Board of Supervisors? (Brett)

No. They're hands-off at that point. (Participant 6, appointed)

How frequently are you in contact with the city council member who appointed you to this district? (Brett)

Just once a year. I give them an update. (Participant 4, appointed)

Do you discuss your possible policy and voting decisions with the person that appointed you to the board before you cast your vote during a board meeting? (Brett)

No. I just give them an update on a district. (Participant 4, appointed)

How frequently are you in contact with the city council when it comes to making policy decisions? (Brett)

It's more of the city council that is very hands-off, and they let us do our jobs. (Participant 3, appointed)

Are you in contact with the people that appointed you? (Brett)

Not very often. There's not much interaction. We have an open house coming up, and we declare mosquito week...I usually just send an email to the city registrar, and they forward it to city council. We send a public health representative from the district to do a presentation to the city council once a year. (Participant 2, appointed)

Other participants (3 out of 13) spoke about meeting regularly with the person who appointed them to the special district, either informally or formally. There was a particular case where Participant 21 stated that they would vote against the specific interests of the city they represented if it would benefit the entire county:

How frequently are you in contact with the city council member who appointed you to this district? (Brett)

Other than drinking with them at the brewery every couple of months, the relationship is that they appoint us and then they are arm's distance. There's no requirement to report back in. We do have a newsletter sent to residents and city council. (Participant 1, appointed)

How frequently are you in contact with the city council member who appointed you to this district? (Brett)

At first, I would give the city council person an update after every meeting because I wanted to keep them in the loop of what was going on. After the second meeting, the city council person let me know that the updates weren't necessary unless it was a critical issue. So now we generally just meet up about every two months to grab a quick cup of coffee and talk. (Participant 23, appointed)

How frequently are you in contact with the city council member who appointed you to this district? (Brett)

I go to the monthly council meetings, and a couple times a year I give a short presentation on behalf of the district. We're working on a couple legislative bills and asking them for support. Last week I set up the operations manager to give a yearly report to the council. I'm very in touch on a monthly basis with the mayor, the council, and the city manager. (Participant 21, appointed)

Do you discuss your possible policy/voting decisions with the person that appointed you to the board before you cast your vote during a board meeting? (Brett)

In a couple cases, I go back to my city and say we're taking a position, and I ask for some guidance. Usually, I don't. We're given the guidance after we're appointed; we're not just representing the city that appointed us. We are there to represent what's best for the county. There have been instances that I have voted for something that would not benefit San Bruno much but would benefit the whole county. (Participant 21, appointed)

There was a single participant who articulated they had a strong relationship with the special district's General Manger, who is not responsible for the board director's appointment.

How frequently are you in contact with city officials, whether it's the mayor or any of the other city council members that approved your appointment? (Brett)

No, I do not have contact with any of the city council members regularly. The one person I'm really close with is the office manager...I contact her about four times a year, and we make our yearly report to the city council. (Participant 5, appointed)

Do you discuss policy decisions with this office manager? (Brett)

It's strictly a summary. Unless it's involving the health of the people of the city I represent or...anybody else's city, we'll discuss that, but nothing internally. (Participant 5, appointed)

**Finding 3:** *For both appointed and elected special district board directors, the most critical and contentious issue among the board directors involves the selection of district leadership (e.g., fire chief, port director, executive director, general manager, district manager, etc.).*

Appointed and elected special district boards must select the district's top leadership position, which has a variety of titles depending on the special district type. For example, a fire protection special district's principal leadership role and head of the organization overseeing personnel and implantation of board policies is known as the Fire Chief. Other special districts, such as a cemetery district, has a General Manger that fulfills the same role as other top leadership positions that are selected by the board of directors. Chief leadership positions in special districts are generally responsible for implementing board approved district policies, overseeing all personnel and day operations, and reporting directly to the board of directors. As the appointing of chief leadership positions is solely decided on by the board of directors on both appointed and elected boards, there typically tends to be a great deal of discussion, vetting, and debate amongst special districts' boards of directors. The information acquired by means of 25 in-depth elite interviews provides extensive documentation of the decision-making practices of special district governing boards. Collecting details and information pertaining to the most debated issues facing a special district governing board offers insight into which issues are the most salient for elected and appointed board directors. Based on participant accounts, an important finding of this research question demonstrates that both appointed and elected special district boards face the same difficulties of selecting the district leadership position.

What are the most debated issues that the board faces? (Brett)

There's not a pattern as I think about the things you just mentioned. Although I definitely think the selection of the CEO of the hospital always becomes a very long process amongst the board directors. They have a lot of influence as to the successes of different programs and morale for employees. (Participant 15, elected)

What are the most contentious (or most debated) issues between the board directors? (Brett)

Our biggest task has been the selection of our District Manager. We have assembled a search committee since we will not be hiring from within the district. This will be our second time flying the position since we could not agree on whether the first pool of applicants met our standard or not. The board places a lot of trust with the District Manager. (Participant 24, appointed)

What are the most debated issues that the board faces? (Brett)

When we needed to hire a new CEO for the hospital, the process was very extensive, and all the board directors, including myself, had firm positions as to which candidate they favored. We had quite a bit of closed sessions to be able to debate and discuss freely our concerns about who should be given the position of CEO. (Participant 11, elected)

Was there ever a sense of pressure by leadership or fellow board directors to have a unanimous vote for the selection of that leadership role of the special district? (Brett)

We were hiring a superintendent and a CEO for the health district. The practice of a unified board is the only way you get someone to work for you. Yes, that does happen—there's a reason for it to happen because the chief/boss doesn't want to spend time having to win those two board members over. That creates a very dysfunctional board. That practice only holds when hiring somebody. (Participant 11, elected)

What are the most debated issues that the board faces? (Brett)

I have to say that it is over the current manager. She's a very good general manager, but her people skills are not that great, and there are members of the board that have difficulty dealing with it. (Participant 7, appointed)

Do you get pressured to vote unanimously by leadership? (Brett)

Just this month...the Executive Director that had been there for most of the term I was in resigned at the end of December. So we had to search, and we did decide that since it was only a five-person board that all five would do the interviews. After the first round of the interviews, one was significantly better but one ranked the person last out of three, and I'm the president of the board, but it was another board member that said, 'something this important, we must have unanimity, and we ought to find out what the dissenting member's concerns were and develop another set of questions.' ...Second round of interviews, unfortunately, the dissenting board member was sick, so we did our best transcribing what the responses were, and the dissenting board member...supported what the majority selected. (Participant 15, elected)

What are the most debated issues that the board faces? (Brett)

We don't have real contentious union issues because we're pretty small. I would say the hiring of a new general manager has been contentious because we have new members, and it's the first meeting for our new members. (Participant 3, appointed)

Do you get pressured to vote unanimously by leadership? (Brett)

When I was not Chair, I don't recall that happening. Since I've been Chair, we've been in the process of selecting a new general manager. I have raised the issue. I have no way of pressuring it. If it's not unanimous, it's not unanimous, but there's certainly...great benefits to the new leader—whoever that may be—to feel like they have the entire board behind him or her. (Participant 3, appointed)

Of the 17 out of 25 participants who stated that one of the most highly contested issues was the selection of the district leadership position, 10 participants mentioned the desire for a unanimous vote in the hiring of the district leadership position. Other participants (8 out of 25) mentioned a variety of issues that have been seen as highly contested, such as environmental impact reports, capital expenditures and savings, grant issues, and the ordering of priorities facing the special district.

**Finding 4 (a) and (b):** *In contrast to classical principal-agent relationship theory, a majority of appointed members profess they feel accountable to the residents who receive the public service or to the special district organization and not to the city council member(s) or county board of supervisors that appointed them to the special district board. The principal-agent relationship between elected special district board directors and the voters is strong.*

The two types of selection methods for special district board directors are: (1) through appointments stemming from either the city council or county board of supervisors, and (2) through elections decided by the voters within the special district. As the board of directors of an independent special district can either be appointed or elected, this dichotomy theoretically



establishes a basis for opposing policy actions taken by the different boards as well as contrasts in toward whom the board of directors ultimately feels accountable. The interviews were completed with the assurance that the participants' identities would remain unknown. This process allowed for the free flow of information and more candid responses by board directors while protecting the participants from the possibility of negative consequences stemming from the interviews. Anonymity was essential as it permitted participants to provide more reliable answers when posed with potentially sensitive questions regarding accountability and decision-making practices. Based on participant descriptions, a significant finding of this research question demonstrates that a majority of appointed board directors (11 out of 13) stated that they felt accountable to the residents or agency, rather than to the city council member(s) or county board supervisor(s) that appointed them. The majority of elected board directors (10 out of 12) identified specifically the "voters" as the persons they feel accountable to.

Some observers might argue that asking special district board directors whom they feel accountable to will only garner responses based on declared accountability and loyalty. However, because special district board elections are considered low salience, and appointed board directors face minute to no risk of losing their appointments, the responses gathered during this study are believed to be honest and reliable. For example, if the appointed special district board directors were to provide the "ideal" response in line with the principal-agent relationship, there would have been more than two participants stating they felt accountable to the person(s) responsible for their appointment. Furthermore, there was a great deal of consistency amongst the responses between special district board directors who continue to seek additional terms (appointed and elected) and others who have made the decision to no longer serve on their special district board after concluding their term.

Whom do you feel you are accountable to? (Brett)

To the residents who pay a small increment of tax money and the tenants.  
(Participant 1, appointed)

Whom do you feel you are accountable to? (Brett)

I feel accountable to the residents who receive the services. I don't care about the city council's opinion. I am going to do what I think is best for the district and its longevity. (Participant 25, appointed)

Whom do you feel you are accountable to? (Brett)

I think the district as a whole and to my city collectively together. I don't feel that I am more responsible to one more than the other, but equally. (Participant 21, appointed)

Whom do you feel you are accountable to? (Brett)

The citizens of Half Moon Bay. (Participant 7, appointed)

Whom do you feel you are accountable to? (Brett)

To me, it's the tenants and the visitors to the harbor. I don't feel like I'm working for the council. I'm trying to make this an efficient and successful operation.  
(Participant 3, appointed)

While the majority of appointed special district board directors' elicited responses contrary to the principal-agent theory of accountability, several appointed board directors (2 out of 13) affirmed that they felt accountable to the individual(s) who appointed them to the special district.

Whom do you feel you are accountable to? (Brett)

I certainly feel accountable to my city and city council. In terms of keeping them on what the district is doing and programs we are implementing. The accountability comes from my own internal sense of what I decide is important. I had some concerns about the environmental impact report, so I made an appointment with the park director to discuss what the city is doing along with

having discussions with the members of the city council. (Participant 9, appointed)

I feel accountable to myself first, but I also feel accountable to the city council that placed me in this position. We must work together as we are trying to make our services we provide, both from the special district and city, efficient and useful to the citizens. (Participant 23, appointed)

The principal-agent relationship is apparent and robust amongst the elected special district board directors. A few elected board directors (2 out of 12) provided responses regarding their accountability to someone other than the voters. The responses from elected board directors tended to be shorter if congruent with the principal-agent theory. Any response that deviated from the principal-agent theory tended to produce lengthier responses, similar to the answers provided by the appointed board directors.

Whom do you feel you are accountable to? (Brett)

To the people who elected me. I also think to the laws which we live under. I feel accountable to the laws, and I feel accountable to my reputation in how people see me. (Participant 14, elected)

I personally feel accountable to the voter and residents of the district. (Participant 17, elected)

I feel accountable to the voters. (Participant 10, elected)

To the people who elected me. (Participant 18, elected)

I feel accountable to the agency. Certainly, I represent a district within the 7 districts of the agency, but I feel the mission of the agency is more important than ...a resident who lives near me, and their particular interest is not the best interest of the agency. Maybe because I haven't had contested elections that I felt accountable to that viewpoint. I think our board generally takes a look at what's best for the agency because we look at what's happening 30 miles from my district, but there is a residual effect. (Participant 13, elected)

The district itself. I definitely know that there are board members who feel accountable to individual voters. I feel some responsibility to the community in that way, but I definitely think the voters elect us to make good decisions, and I'm confident that I do the research I need to do to make a decision, so I don't feel a

pressure, but just to make sure the district is run in a healthy fashion. I run a few businesses so I look at the district like a business. (Participant 12, elected)

One elected board director provided a rationale within their response regarding accountability by specifically mentioning the selection method of a nearby special district that provides similar services but operates with an appointed board of directors.

Whom do you feel you are accountable to? (Brett)

The citizens of our district. They elected us, and this is where the difference between being elected and appointed is, because in the port industry ironically there's a lot of appointed commissioners. Ports are all over the country, and I know there's a clear difference either because we are elected by the public and even though we don't tax them, it's still a public access. That's where we report to. To me, it's the public. If you look at Ventura, they're responsible to the city council. There's another layer involved there. It's funny because in Redwood City they have 3 commissioners...appointed by the Mayor and...you could be pulled off if the Mayor doesn't like you. You are at the whim of one person, and it makes it more political. It changes the flavor and the culture of the organization, because we can do things and we can make decisions not beholden to a single individual. (Participant 19, elected)

**Finding 5:** *There is no significant difference in the levels of public participation between appointed and elected special district boards. The overall public participation remains low.*

With two different types of selection methods of independent special districts, it is worth asking whether there is a difference between the two in public participation. Both types of special districts provide a specific public service to its residents, whether that be fire protection, water, sanitation, libraries, mosquito abatement, healthcare, etc. These services are made available to the special district's residents who are represented directly or indirectly by the board of directors. Political participation remains low throughout all forms of representative government in the U.S.—local, state, and federal. The details and information provided by the

interviews confirmed the expectation that levels of public participation with governing boards continue to remain low. However, the interviews did provide an opportunity for both elected and appointed special district board directors to discuss scenarios, as well as particular issues, which affected the level of public participation by increasing the turnout of attendees to their monthly board meetings. Based on participant descriptions, a straightforward finding of this research question demonstrates that both appointed and elected special district boards (23 out of 25) experience low levels of public participation at their meetings.

On average how many public participants are in attendance during your meetings?  
(Brett)

Zero levels of participation at our meetings. I can count the number of people who have shown up to our meeting in a year on one hand. (Participant 4, appointed)

When do you see increased levels of participation by the public? (Brett)

When we did an environmental impact report. There were 3 or 4 groups of people who showed up. Also, when I served on a different type of special district (water) we had a lot of participation but that was because we were in the process of dissolving the special district. (Participant 4, appointed)

On average, how many public participants are in attendance during your meetings? (Brett)

There really isn't, and I'm surprised at that because it involves the health of the county, and maybe I've seen about 5 people in a year. (Participant 5, appointed)

When do you see increased levels of participation by the public? (Brett)

We don't have many people come into our meetings. (Participant 5, appointed)

On average, how many public participants are in attendance during your meetings? (Brett)

We may have one at a meeting in a year's time unless there's specific media attention pointed at the district. When we publish the agenda we're required to do, some of the board directors share the agenda with their cities in case they want to share that with their residents. (Participant 21, appointed)

When do you see increased levels of participation by the public? (Brett)

When there's a hot topic issue. (Participant 21, appointed)

On average, how many public participants attend your meetings? (Brett)

Three, unless there's a particularly big issue on the agenda. Next meeting we're expecting 25 because we're going to do a report and project on piping 3 miles of ditch from our reservoir. (Participant 20, elected)

On average, how many public participants are in attendance during your meetings? (Brett)

Very minimal. It's usually someone who has something on the agenda. In our district we write a lot of grants for nonprofit. Unless there's something specific like hospital closure, we don't get much participation. (Participant 12, elected)

On average, how many public participants attend your meetings? (Brett)

Besides the staff required to be in attendance, very little if at all people from the public actually attend our meeting. Most of the time it is friends and family who show up to watch the promotions, hirings, and awards to be given out to our personnel, and once that is over, everyone leaves as the board begins to work through the agenda items. (Participant 22, elected)

When do you see increased levels of participation by the public? (Brett)

When the board approved a tax measure to be on the ballot a couple of years ago that would reopen two closed fire stations, we saw an increase of public participation. (Participant 22, elected)

The overwhelming majority of both appointed and elected special district board directors stated that they received very minimal, if any, public participation at their board meetings throughout the year. However, there were a couple of participants (2 out of 25) who claimed to have consistent levels of moderate to high public participation during their board meetings. Both of these cases originate from the same type of special district, port and harbor.

On average, how many public participants do you have in attendance at your meetings? (Brett)

I would say typically there are 15 people or so in the audience, and if we have an issue then we're packed. I would say overall, we tend to have 15 people or so. (Participant 3, appointed)

When do you see an increased level of participation? (Brett)

One issue is when we had a project we were working on that would impact some of the fishermen, so they all showed up. We've had some big development proposals and larger projects that get proposed. (Participant 3, appointed)

On average, how many public participants are in attendance during your meetings? (Brett)

We're talking maybe 20 observers, 3 to 4 speakers, and tenants tend to come to our meetings. (Participant 1, appointed)

When do you see increased levels of participation by the public? (Brett)

When we had a development of site for a hotel, probably 35 to 40 people. We expect that and want that input, and we certainly research the information prior to the meeting. (Participant 1, appointed)

### ***Conclusion***

The purpose of this research endeavor was to explore and examine the principal-agent relationships and inherent differences between appointed and elected independent special district board directors in California. The conclusions from this study follow the research questions and the findings, and therefore speak to five areas: (1) the origins of where an appointed special district board director begin their service; (2) the frequency at which appointed special district board directors communicate with the city council member(s) or county board supervisor(s) who were responsible for their appointment to the special district; (3) the most contentious issues that appointed and elected special district boards must address; (4) the intricacies and dynamics of the principal-agent relationships transpiring between appointed and elected special district board directors and their principal(s); and (5) the levels of public participation observed at special

district board meetings. Following is a discussion of the major findings and conclusion drawn from this study. This discussion is followed by the researcher's recommendations and discourse of further areas of research that could be conducted with respect to special districts and representation.

The first major finding of this study is that a majority of appointed special district board directors admitted to having a prior or existing relationship with a city council member(s) or county board of supervisor(s) preceding their appointment to the special district board. Various appointed special district board directors were approached directly by a city council member or county board supervisor inquiring if they would be willing to serve on the special district board. One conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that many appointed special district vacancies remain unknown to the public and therefore does not attract many applicants. Some vacancies on appointed special district boards do not receive any applications, so the city council members or county board of supervisors either leave the vacancy unfilled or reach out to someone they know and ask if they will would be willing to serve on the appointed special district board. Another conclusion that could be taken away from this research is that city council member(s) and county board of supervisor(s) may prefer to appoint an individual whom they already have an existing relationship with and have knowledge of rather than to appoint an unknown applicant. City council member(s) and county board of supervisor(s) who appoint an individual with whom they have had a preexisting relationship have more knowledge regarding the appointed individual and trust that they would act in accordance with the policy preferences of city council member(s) and county board of supervisor(s).

The second major finding was that appointed special district board directors often do not communicate regularly (at least every other month) with the city council member(s) and county



board of supervisor(s) (principals) who appointed them to their special district board. There is not a set standard by which appointed special district board directors must communicate with the individuals responsible for their appointment, but typical appointment relationships necessitate regular communication. Many of the appointed special district board directors who participated in the study articulated that most of their monthly board meetings tend to be routine in nature and rarely have critical or controversial issues placed on their agenda. If this is to be true, then appointed special district board directors would not have a need to communicate with the city council member(s) or county board of supervisor(s) responsible for their appointment. An alternate explanation regarding the lack of communication could be that the city council member(s) or county board of supervisor(s) who made the appointment sees the position on the special district board as that of a trustee rather than a delegate. These two different forms of representation are at opposite sides of a continuum. There is representation in the meaning of “to stand for” on one hand and “taking care of” on the other (Bengtsson and Wass, 2010). A representative that is a delegate “stands for” something or someone and represents those specified interests. On the contrary, a trustee is a representative that acts based on their own common sense and makes use of their own discretion without further consultation with their principal.

The study’s third major finding was that both appointed and elected special district boards share the same common difficulties of selecting district leadership. A conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that the selection of district leadership can potentially have profound effects on the special district with concern to district policy implementation, budget and management issues, the organization’s morale, and the special district’s overall success. Board members are unable to participate in the day-to-day operations of the special district, so they

attempt to select the highest quality candidate for the leadership position, adding another layer of agency to an already existing principal-agent relation, whether that be appointed or elected. An additional finding stemming from this inquiry is that special district board directors actively engage in persuading fellow board directors' votes to ensure a unanimous confirmation vote for the incoming leadership position. A conclusion to draw from this finding is that many special district board directors perceive an advantage—and in certain instances, a necessity—in having a unanimous confirmation vote to demonstrate support, confidence, and unity to the public, organization, and individual who is to be hired.

The sample of appointed and elected special district board directors professed whom they felt accountable to while serving on their respective boards. The study's fourth finding was that the principal-agent relationship theory did not apply to the majority of appointed special district board directors, while it proved strong for elected special district board directors. The primary conclusion that can be drawn is that elected special district boards are consistent with the principal-agent theory due to their direct connection to voters and their position as board director, whereas appointed special district board directors do not perceive their position as contingent on implementing their principal's interests. This could be due to a variety of factors such as a lack of interest and attention given by the city council member(s) and county board of supervisor(s) (principals). Appointed special district board directors may place a higher priority on the organization and services delivered rather than on the preferences of their principal. It could also be that the city council member(s) and county board of supervisor(s) see the special district board position as that of a trustee rather than a delegate.

The fifth and final finding of the study was that the public participation levels for both appointed and elected special district boards remain low. A conclusion that can be drawn from

this finding is that special districts are similar to other forms of representative government throughout the U.S. and experience low levels of public participation. This could be a more systemic problem originating from representative government as illustrated by the lack of public participation at the other levels of government—state and federal. An additional conclusion could be that participation requires transaction costs for individuals, such as researching the special district meeting date, time and location of the meeting, transportation to and from the board meeting, speaking at the meeting, etc., which all may be too high of a burden for the public. A competing conclusion from this finding is that the public does not participate until it affects them financially, or until a specific issue is raised to a level of concern. Drawing from Mathew McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz (1984) *Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrol versus Fire Alarms*, residents who live within a special district do not participate regularly with their special district; instead they wait until they are notified by the press, interest groups, or friends of a subject matter that has risen to the level necessitating public participation. The subject matters that can activate higher levels of public participation vary, including but not limited to the following: the closing of a special district, tax increases, increases or decreases in services provided, employment layoffs, and scandals (criminal and non-criminal). An additional conclusion could be made that port and harbor special districts see higher levels of public participation due to the fact that their policies and services have the capability to directly affect the financial stability of individuals, businesses, and local government.

These findings bring to light the differences as well as similarities of appointed and elected special districts in California. The work conducted throughout this study demonstrates how representation, decision-making, and accountability can vary depending on the selection method of the individual serving on a special district board. A potentially important

consideration that should be examined in the future is whether these characteristics that apply to California appointed and elected special districts are consistent with other states' special district practices. This study was unable to obtain interviews from special district board directors serving on utility, recreation and parks, and sanitation districts. Further research could include participants from these types of special districts and add to our understanding of special districts. These are empirical questions and possibilities that we may explore in future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### Composition and Elections:

### Demographics, Political Experience, and Aspirations

## ***Introduction***

Voting necessitates costs, requiring information and time. Voters must choose between candidates, but also face the decision to vote in the first place. A majority of American adults do not vote in congressional elections, let alone in local elections such as city council races, county offices, special districts, and other local jurisdictions. The Pew Research Center reported that approximately 27% of registered voters say they always vote in local elections (Barthel et al, 2016). This research inquiry will be focusing on a specific type of local government: California special districts. Special districts offer an array of public services, including fire protection, water, library, sanitation, healthcare, and many other public goods. Local government is often considered the bedrock of democracy, as it is the closest to the people. Scholars and researchers have paid little attention to special districts, as they seem to overlook their efficacy and representation. But how do local voters make their decisions in regard to special district elections? Who ultimately wins a seat on a special district board, and are the elected representatives from special districts considered representative of their communities?

The first modern survey studies of elections identified partisanship as the single most important indicator of individuals' voting behavior. It has remained, notwithstanding a decline in party influence from the 1960s through the 1970s. The 2016 U.S. presidential election at first seemed to challenge the conventional model of partisanship and voting as many Democrats and Republicans were dissatisfied with their respective party's nominees, but exit polls reported virtually the same percentage (90%) of voting loyalty as they had in previous elections (Dalton, 2017). If partisan identity among voters is such a strong indicator of voting behavior, what takes place in elections that are considered nonpartisan, such as special district elections? What can influence a special district election without party identification labeled on voting ballots?

California special district races are considered nonpartisan elections. This reveals that, unlike congressional or presidential elections where candidates have partisan identity associated with their name on voting ballots, candidates for special districts do not have a “Republican,” “Democrat,” or any other party identification printed beside their names on ballots. This absence of party identification prompts the question: How do voters decide which candidate(s) to vote for in special district elections? A case study of a 2018 southern California fire protection special district election between two incumbents competing against two challengers with differing levels of funding and identifiers offers interesting insight into how voters participate and select candidates in low-information local elections.

Special districts can be seen as a potential starting point for some politicians, while others see them as a final resting point. Special districts can act as a type of shallow end in the pool of politics, where Congress and state legislatures can be seen as the deep end of the pool. Most politicians try to learn and gain governmental experience by serving through the lower ranks of government such as city councils, school boards, and special districts. Special districts can act as a type of shallow end for novice politicians who are beginning their career in public service and would like to get their feet wet in local government before jumping into the deeper end of the pool of politics. A counterviewpoint offered would be that special districts are a final resting place for seasoned local officials. Special districts can serve as a final resting place for experienced local politicians who have served their communities in a multitude of different capacities and would like to continue serving as they reach retirement and later stages of life. Both of these scenarios are probable, and through data collection and interviews, each will be analyzed and discussed. Later, I will elaborate on the possible ramifications stemming from the levels of experience and career ambitions of special district representatives.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section, I place the literature review, where the history and theoretical and methodological advances in the study of special districts, political careers, experiences, and representation are discussed. In the second section, I present the methodological approaches and framework that is employed. I will present my variables and the data that was used during the empirical analysis. A mixed methods approach enhanced the validity of the project by having the quantitative aspects complemented by the qualitative contributions. Board directors, candidates, and interest groups were interviewed for the 2018 Apple Valley Fire Protection District (AVFPD) election case study. I then present the results and discuss the demographic analysis, career experiences, and trajectories of individuals who sit on special district boards. Later, I consider the possible causes of why we see such a discrepancy in representation on special district boards in California. The figures are provided to augment the results from the statistical analysis. The last section concludes and discusses further areas of research that could be studied with respect to special districts, voting behavior, and representation for local government.

### ***Literature Review***

Past experiences as well as future aspirations shape decision-making processes and cultivate possible leaders for future higher political offices. The study of politicians' past experiences and life histories signifies an objective and measurable method for examining individual-level influences as to why one might serve the public by sitting on a governing board. In the late mid-nineteenth century, Tocqueville encapsulated America's antipathy to the creation of a ruling political class by noting how "American civil servants remain indistinguishable from the mass" ([1840] 2003, 236). For most of the nineteenth century, extensive legislative and



political careers were unique. Spending time serving in Congress was viewed as a distraction from private activity or state and local careers (Stewart, 1989). Throughout many places, rotation agreements were created to broadly disperse opportunities to serve in public office, which helped cultivate a disdain for politics as a profession. The fundamental belief of rotation started to erode towards the end of the nineteenth century (Kernell, 1977). By the turn of the century, individuals began alerting the public about the expansion and proliferation of political professionals and the disappearance of amateurs (Bryce, 1984). At the start of the 1920s, Beard (1922) and others were arguing the existence of a ruling political class to be established fact and wondering about its antidemocratic implications (MacKenzie, 2015). Negative implications stemmed from the argument that as the professionalism of a legislative body increases, its capacity for authentic political representation declines. Polsby's (1968) landmark study provided evidence to support these contemporary impressions.

Much of the research regarding pre- and post-political careers and trajectories focuses on congressional careers. Some studies of modern Congress concentrate on specific subsets of members, such as women (Lawless and Fox, 2005) and racial ethnic minorities (Swain, 1993), which tend to argue that institutional and organizational barriers are present and troublesome to recruitment efforts. Other scholars develop predictions from theories of progressive ambition (Schlesinger, 1966) to examine state legislators' decisions to run for Congress (Berkman, 1994). An analysis of political campaigns by Canon (1990) discloses that less experienced candidates emerged during times of great electoral opportunity. Differences among amateurs and professionals in congressional tenure and leadership roles while serving heavily suggests that political experience matters, but differences in other activities are minor, and sample variation exists among amateurs themselves.

A study conducted by Donald Matthews examines prior life experiences of U.S. Senators in the post-war to attempt to comprehend how “human factors” lead to different governing models and decision-making processes (Matthews 1959, 1969). Building on this literature, contemporary research connects legislators’ life experiences with legislative outcomes, such as the role of race (Cannon, 1999), gender (Fridkin and Kenney, 2014a, 2014b), class (Carnes, 2013), and personal relationships (Washington, 2008), and examine how they influence legislators’ representative styles in Congress.

The effect of a legislators’ past political experiences on legislative behavior and party loyalty have also garnered the interests of many scholars (Grofman, Griffin, and Berry 1995; Matthews 1984; Travits 2009; Theriault 2013; Theriault and Rhode 2011). Looking towards the future and political aspirations for higher office, Schlesinger (1966) claims that regardless of ultimate personal hopes, office aspirations develop primarily in response to the immediate political environment. Schlesinger continues arguing that a political career is the culmination of “a series of rational marginal choices” and not an exhaustively planned out political career trajectory. He asserts that most political careers are made in response to moderately short-range factors and taken step-by-step in relation to the political environment.

In essence, Schlesinger’s theory of political ambition reflects the hierarchy of political offices in the United States that functions as a “career ladder” or “opportunity structure” for ambitious politicians. The idea is that lower level offices act as a type of launch pad or springboard into other higher political offices, for example the decision for a member from the House of Representatives to run for the Senate (Canon 1990; Francis and Kenny 200; Matthews 1960). Schlesinger details when political ambition may be discrete, or when “the politician wants a particular office for its specified term and then chooses to withdraw from public service and

steps down” (1966). Another term described by Schlesinger is static ambition, which manifests itself when the politician “seeks to make a long-run career out of a particular office” and continues to seek reelection. Lastly, ambition is progressive “when the politician aspires to attain an office more important than the one” that is currently held (i.e., seeking a higher political office to climb the ladder of political careers) (1966).

Rhode’s examination of political ambition (1979) focuses directly on progressive ambition: Under what circumstances would a member of the House make a run for the Senate? Rhode’s analysis demonstrated that the decisions of House members of Congress to seek higher office were the result of an explicit calculus that weighted risks, the probability of success, and the relative benefits of continuing a career in the House as compared to a higher office elsewhere. However, the focus and design of both the Schlesinger and Rhode studies did not allow for or discuss an opportunity to assess discrete ambition in any detail. Even though discrete ambition is a vital part of the logic behind the ambition theory, it has never been subjected to empirical scrutiny. Simply put, theoretically, we know why members of Congress want to climb the political career ladder, but we do not know much in regard to who and why members of Congress decide to get off the ladder.

A large literature that compares men’s and women’s performance in campaigns and elections finds that there is not much difference between the two groups. One of the most well-known conclusions in the literature on women in politics is that female candidates win general elections at the same frequency as male candidates (Burrell 1994; Fox 2006; Newman 1994; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997). Furthermore, females raise as much money during their campaigns as males raise (Burrell 1994; Fox 2006; Uhlaner and Schlozman 1986). Viewing political competition and the role of women in politics through these lens, many scholars have

concluded that discrimination against women in politics is a phase that took place in the past and is no longer present (e.g., Fox 2006; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1998; Smith and Fox 2001).

Although in contrast, there have been several experimental studies which suggest that voters do harbor bias against female candidates. Rosenwasser and Dean (1989) discover that voters prefer “masculine” traits in candidates for all levels of public office. Another study finds that voters’ gender stereotypes are most harmful to female candidates running for national office when compared to male candidates (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993). Fox and Smith (1998) conducted a study where subjects were presented with a series of hypothetical female and male House candidates and uncovered that significantly fewer subjects choose to vote for female candidates. Along the same line of thought, a substantial percentage of American adults express reluctance to support women in the political arena. The General Survey, for example, shows that 23% of adults think that most men are better suited emotionally for politics than most women (Dolan, 2004).

A group of studies and research argue that the road to congressional office may present more roadblocks to women than to men. Lawless and Pearson (2008) show that during a primary congressional election where there is at least one female as a candidate tends to attract a larger number of contenders. Palmer and Simon (2006) discover that male incumbents are more likely to face uncontested primary and general elections as compared to female incumbents who are often faced with challengers in reelections. Additionally, Milyo and Schosberg (2000) uncover that female candidates are significantly more likely to face high-quality challengers than male candidates are. These trends continue throughout the political sphere where political parties and leaders believe that there is generally more uncertainty about a woman’s electability than a man’s; thus, they are less likely to recruit women to run for office (Sanbonmatsu, 2006).

Particularly, the women who decide to become candidates for Congress tend to have greater previous political experience than male individuals seeking a congressional seat (Pearson and McGhee, 2009). While previous research has shown that male and female candidates raise the same amount of money, Jenkins (2007) finds that females have to work harder to do so.

Additionally, there has been much research and debate amongst scholars examining the differences between male and female once they are elected into office and begin to govern. Research suggests that female legislators tend to spend more time and resources on policy areas thought of as “women’s issues” (e.g., Norton 1999; Thomas 1991; Swers 2002). Furthermore, other studies have shown how having the presence of females in legislatures influences the nature of policy results (Besley and Case 2003; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Rehavi 2007). Anzia and Berry (2011) provide evidence to suggest that female members of Congress perform better than males by analyzing how much federal spending is secured for their congressional districts and analyzing the frequency of sponsoring legislation. They argue that the inherent biases placed on female candidates throughout the electoral process makes it much more difficult for female candidates to get elected, so only the most qualified, politically ambitious females will emerge and make it to Congress. Once in Congress, those females who tend to have a lengthy and established political career are better versed in the legislative process to be able to secure more federal spending for their congressional districts as compared to male members of Congress. Anzia and Berry (2011) found that on average, congresswomen secure roughly 9% more spending from federal discretionary programs than congressmen. This spending bonus amounts to an extra 49 million dollars for a congressional district if a woman, rather than a man, represents them.

No matter an individual's gender or ethnic makeup, running for or being appointed to a public office at any level for the first time will introduce an individual to new knowledge, and it will be transformative in understanding public life and serving the public. When individuals decide to enter the public life and run for office, they are likely to face media scrutiny. Even if this is just at the local level, such as in city councils or special districts, as opposed to the state level and beyond, it will still be a new experience for an individual who has never partaken in politics. Freshman candidates or freshman board directors on special districts will encounter members of their community, communities from which they are seeking votes, or constituencies whom they are serving and may have never been in contact with. At each turn there are new experiences that are shaping the personality and opinions of newly elected or appointed officials. Special districts have the general authority to compensate board directors for attendance at meetings under the California Government Code, although the monetary earnings are not enough to provide a living and are relatively minor<sup>1</sup>. Grasping the responsibilities of the special district, understanding the inner workings of the special district staff, advocating for the public, and learning the laws and regulations placed on a public official serving on a special district board allows an individual to embark on a transformative journey to learning how to serve in a political office.

### ***Methodology***

Special districts are common throughout the state of California and provide a variety of public goods to its citizens whether that may be fire protection, water, sanitation, recreation and

<sup>1</sup> Most California code sections set the maximum compensation rate at \$100 for each meeting attended by a board director or each day in which a board director is engaging in official duties. Other code sections explicitly state that special district board directors are to receive no compensation in their roles as board directors (e.g., pest abatement districts, citrus pest control districts, police protection districts, port districts, and memorial districts).

parks, utility, and many other types of public services. Each of the 1,947 independent special districts is required to have some form of governing board (appointed or elected), which is responsible for the special district's policies, laws, regulations, budget, and management staff, along with other critical issues relevant to their district. A majority of board directors who serve on special districts are elected, but appointed board directors on special districts still enjoy the same authority, jurisdiction, and powers as elected board directors. To investigate the typical composition of a California special district and examine the types of people involved and participating in the governing of special districts, a multi-method approach was undertaken. Both qualitative and quantitative methodological practices were utilized. A survey was distributed to current special district board directors, along with in-depth interviews to supplement and assist with the research inquiry.

Special districts are often seen as the most local form of government, making them the closest to the people. In some regards, special districts are very similar to school districts, which are typically seen as entry-level political offices for an individual who seeks to become involved in local politics. This idea led to the investigation into whether special districts board director positions are being utilized as a type of stepping-stone for future political aspirations, or if the board of directors acted as a final resting place for seasoned local politicians. Another segment of interests pertaining to special district board directors concerns the makeup and composition of the representatives. Within the survey distributed to special district board directors were questions regarding age, sex, race, and political experience, among other points of interests.

The usage of electronic surveys continues to increase within social science research, as does the body of literature addressing design concerns and the benefits and drawbacks accompanied with online survey practices (Lazar & Preece, 1999; Schmidt, 1997; Stanton, 1998).

Many argue that researchers are turning away from traditional survey techniques, such as paper-and-pencil methods, and transitioning to electronic surveys for three compelling reasons: (1) decreased costs, (2) faster response times, and (3) increased response rates (Lazar & Preece, 1999; Oppermann, 1995; Saris, 1991). Notwithstanding, there has been much debate about the actual benefits and advantages to electronic surveys, most concerning the effects of response rate (Kiesler & Sproull, 1986; Mehta & Sivadas, 1995; Sproull, 1986; Tse, Tse, Yin, Ting, Yi, Yee, & Hong, 1995). While a researcher chooses to utilize an electronic survey as their methodological approach, they should be cognizant of the factors—coverage, response rates, or frame bias—that could have a large effect on the research project's results and validity.

As previously mentioned, the advent of the Internet has permitted contact between researcher(s) and their subject(s) to be much more accessible. Internet surveys remove the costs associated with face-to-face and telephone surveys and eliminate the need for the researcher to be in the same geographical space as their subject. Researchers can conduct national and international surveys without ever having to leave their own hometown. This low cost of implementing online surveys permits the researcher to cast a wider net (increased sample size) with little to no cost applied to the survey. An original dataset was created for this research project containing the names and emails of board directors and the types of special districts on which they serve. An attempt was made to reach out to the California Special District Association (CSDA), which is the chief advocacy group for special district interests, for their direct assistance in making contact with as many special district board directors via email as possible. The CSDA is a statewide association representing all types of special districts and providing legal advice, legislative advocacy, and information crucial to special district management. As the AVFPD is a member of the CSDA, and I myself am the Vice President of



the AVFPD, I was able to gain access to data that is only available to CSDA members. It should be noted that the CSDA is not an exhaustive association that includes every independent special district in California, but instead is only comprised of California special districts that have paid the annual membership fees to be a part of CSDA. The fees associated with the CSDA are annual and range depending on the operating cost of each special district (\$177 – \$7,252)<sup>2</sup>. There are approximately 2,000 special districts (independent and dependent) that are members of the CSDA. In hopes of establishing a partnership to help the CSDA gain a better understanding of their members while simultaneously collecting data for the research project, a proposition was made to the executive staff of the CSDA to ask for their assistance with the project, including their support and access to their detailed email list of currently serving board directors. The CSDA executive staff denied the request and stated that they did not want to share their comprehensive email lists for the purpose of my academic research.

With the CSDA not willing to share their email lists of currently serving special district board directors, I opted to compose my own independent contact list. As AVFPD is a member of the CSDA, our board directors have access to a member directory that provides inaccessible data to the public, including the direct phone numbers of special districts and their website URLs. With this incomplete information, I was able to compile an original dataset by way of visiting each special district's website and acquiring each board director's email address. The creation of the original dataset stemmed from visiting roughly 430 individual special district websites, culminating in hundreds of email addresses of representatives that currently sit on California special districts.

<sup>2</sup> The Apple Valley Fire Protection District's membership dues for 2019-2020 for the California Special District Association were \$7,252.

While in the process of designing and implementing the online questionnaire that was to be given to California special district board directors, there were numerous variables to take into account. The layout, formatting, structuring of the questions, and technical requirements were all scrutinized to minimize any drawbacks or adverse effects that could jeopardize the validity of the survey. There was a total of 10 questions listed within the online survey questionnaire. The website company SurveyMonkey® was employed, as they are an online survey development software service business. The layout and organization of the online survey questionnaire is imperative to be as straightforward and simple as possible, as one does not want to confuse the subjects partaking in the survey. An initial email was sent to the list of special district board members from the original dataset created of CSDA members. The initial introductory email included a brief paragraph informing the potential respondents of who I was and the research inquiry into California special districts. The information given within the email prior to the completion of the survey was to inform the board directors of who was conducting the research and additional background information and supplemental material to aid in proving the legitimacy of the inquiry at hand. In order to gain the trust of the possible respondents of the online survey questionnaire, I informed them that the research inquiry was coming from an academic institution (University of California, Irvine) and that “I am also a California special district board member.” Embedded within the initial introduction email was the first question to the online survey questionnaire. This was strategically placed within the email in hopes to minimize the costs associated with the subject to partake in the online survey questionnaire. By providing the first question within the initial email, the respondent can begin the survey without any additional navigation or extra costs to gain access to the survey. This helped to achieve a

higher response rate. The answering process was made easy and accessible to the respondents in part because of the format of the survey questionnaire.

To avoid respondent survey fatigue, the questionnaire was limited to 10 questions with one of the questions asking for an additional follow-up free response. The sentences articulating the questions did not exceed 20 words, and the consistency of the question format was maintained to avoid pitfalls of survey research (Reynolds, Woods & Baker, 2007). The response formats for all questions within the online survey questionnaire were outfitted with radio buttons. Radio buttons are small circles that are located next to the response options of a close-ended question. Furthermore, radio buttons were applied to the survey because only one radio button within any given group of radio buttons can be selected at a time, unlike check boxes, which permit many selections within a set (Reynolds, Woods & Baker, 2007). Question number 8 within the online survey questionnaire is the only exception to the radio button format due to the fact it asks the respondent to provide which political office they might have an interest in pursuing in the future. This necessitated a typed, free response format to allow the respondent to provide critical information regarding the potential political office of interest and, in some cases, multiple political offices they might seek in the future.

Arguably, the most critical aspect of any survey revolves around the question type and phrasing of the questions. Most of the questions within the survey were considered non-sensitive type questions. The only exceptions would be questions numbered 7 and 8 of the survey. Question 7 asks the respondent: “Do you see yourself seeking other political offices after serving on your special district board?” Question 8 asks the respondent, if they answered affirmatively to question 7, to please provide in a free response text box which political office they have an interest in serving. Some may consider this a sensitive question, because the researcher was

inquiring about the political ambition of a currently serving special district board director. As previously discussed, all of the questions within the survey were closed-ended, except for question 8. There were 9 close-ended questions that contained nominal, ordinal, and interval type questions. Each of these types of questions allowed the respondent to provide vital information that helps us gain a better understanding of who is representing special districts in California.

The online survey questionnaire was sent via email to 460 currently serving California special district board directors from the original dataset. The population in this research is comprised of California independent special district board directors, both appointed and elected. The original dataset of 460 email addresses was not an exhaustive list of all special district board directors but served as the sample for the study. Out of the 460 survey invitations sent, 2 emails bounced back and were unable to be delivered to the recipients. A total of 458 survey invitations were delivered via email, and 135 California special district board members completed the 10-question survey regarding the composition of special district representatives. The response rate of the online survey questionnaire was 29%. Given the parameters and constraints of the study and the difficulty of having strangers participate in survey research, achieving a response rate of 29% yielded meaningful insight into makes of the representatives sitting on California special districts.

To investigate the 2018 Apple Valley Fire Protection District election case study election, a mixed methods approach of both quantitative and qualitative tactics was used. Board directors, candidates, and interest groups were interviewed for the case study, and financial records were analyzed for the inquiry into local special district elections. Due to the fact that the incumbents and candidates participating in the election were colleagues of mine, I opted to make use of these personal relationships I had cultivated throughout my tenure as a special district board director

and became an *observing participant* to help gather critical data (Kaminski, 2018). Acquiring information relating to political intentions and strategy tend to be very difficult to penetrate. According to Kaminski (2018), being an observing participant is different than a participant observation in two respects: “(a) observing participant enters a community through a similar social process as its other members and is subject to similar rules; (b) observing participant undertakes field research *as if s/he* was a researcher”. The broad majority of the data collected during this research inquiry of the Apple Valley Fire Protection District 2018 election was conducted through my experience as an observing participant.

My data sources can be sorted into a few categories: (i) special district board meetings, (ii) informal meetings, (iii) campaign expenditures, and (iv) campaign documents. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to gather as much information as possible about the process, tactics, and strategies of each of the interested parties. This allowed for a free flow of information to transpire, which in turn provided a more candid look into a local California special district election. Some of the conversations took place over coffee, lunch, or even after a fire district board meeting. The data was collected over 12 months, with conversations lasting anywhere from 25 minutes to over an hour. Conversations were conducted without a recording device; instead, a detailed memo was written after each conversation expressing the main points and particulars of what was said about the 2018 AVFPD election. This minor case study is not purposed to be indicative or extrapolated to all California special district elections, but instead is to provide general analysis of the process, tactics, and strategies used by candidates and interested parties in local elections.

## ***Results***

This section includes the historical and descriptive information regarding the AVFPD and the election of two board directors in 2018. This section also presents the key findings acquired from an online survey conducted with 135 currently serving special district board directors representing various types of special districts throughout California, including fire protection, water, utility, recreation and parks, cemetery, library, mosquito and vector control, irrigation, and healthcare. The results of this quantitative inquiry address the research into whether special districts are typically utilized as a stepping-stone for novice politicians seeking further political advancement or a final resting place for seasoned local politicians. The findings also address the research problem of determining how representative the special district board directors truly are with respect to California's population. Accompanying the descriptive data of special district board directors serving in California are the key findings obtained through interviews regarding the 2018 AVFPD election. The findings from the quantitative case study of the fire protection special district election in 2018 spotlights a unique phenomenon, which has the potential to have far-reaching and long-lasting effects for local elections and special districts. The composition, political experience, and characteristics of California special district board directors are examined, and the results from the survey with brief discussions are presented below.

*Composition of California Special District Board Directors*

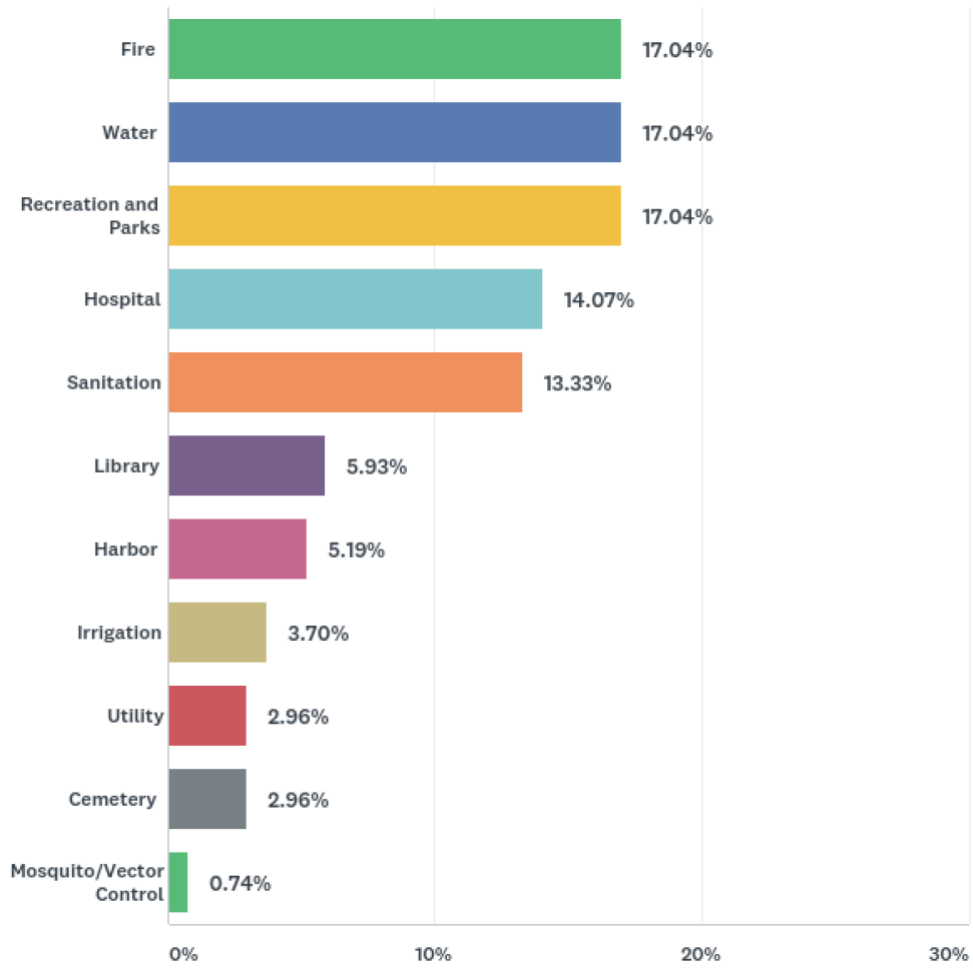


Figure 2.1 Type of Special District Represented in Survey

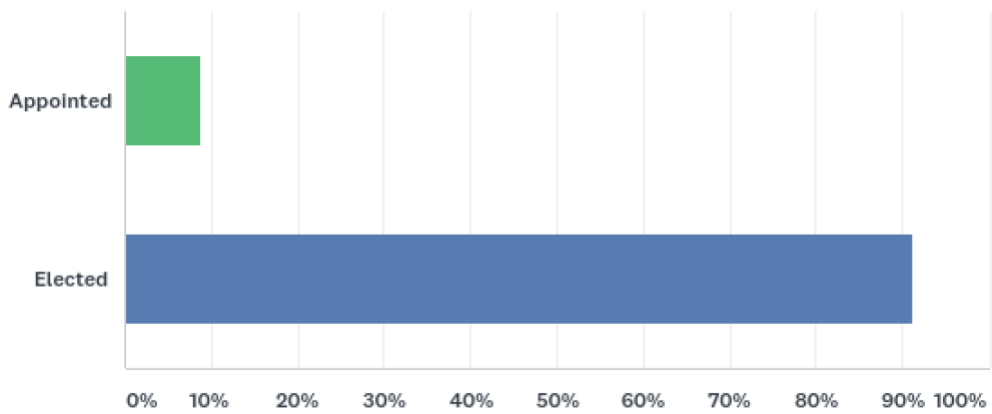


Figure 2.2 Appointed and Elected Special District Board Directors

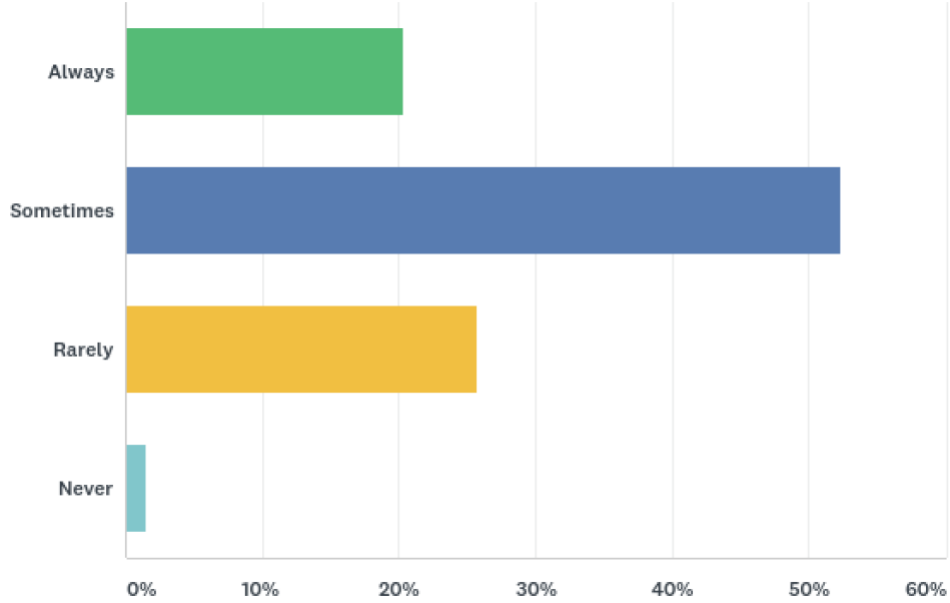


Figure 2.3 Frequency of Contested Special District Elections

The data gathered from the survey was made possible from the collection of California special district board directors' emails acquired by means of the creation of an original database. The participants of the survey captured 11 different types of special districts throughout the entire state. Fire, water, and recreation and parks were the three most common types of special districts from which respondents participated in the survey. Fire districts are also the most common type of special district in California, totaling approximately 346. The percentage of appointed special district board directors who responded to the survey was slightly lower than the actual percentage of actively serving appointed board directors. The survey reported that 8.89% of participants respond as appointed board directors, while the actual percentage of appointed board directors in California is approximately 18%. A majority of special districts tend to be elected, whereas certain types of special districts such as mosquito and vector control, cemetery, and port and harbor districts have a much higher likelihood of having an appointed



board of directors. A question regarding elections was put forth inquiring about the frequency with which incumbents sitting on an elected special district board faced challengers in their elections. A majority (52%) responded “sometimes” regarding challengers in election, and variation among the different types of special districts was minimal. However, the respondents who answered incumbents “always” (20%) face challengers during elections—hospital and recreation and parks—had the highest levels of propensity. Fire districts account for having the largest number of respondents who claimed incumbents “rarely” face challengers in elections.

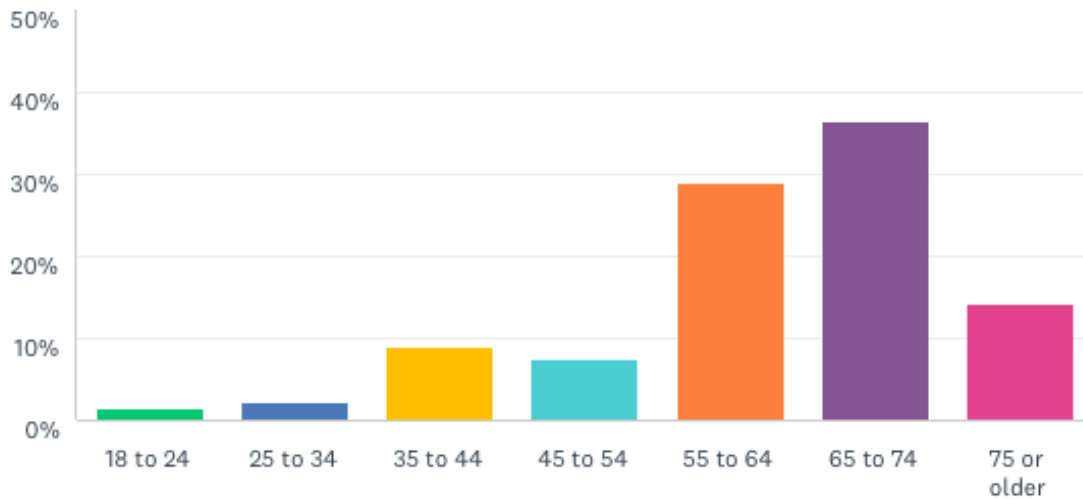


Figure 2.4 Age Groups of Special District Board Directors

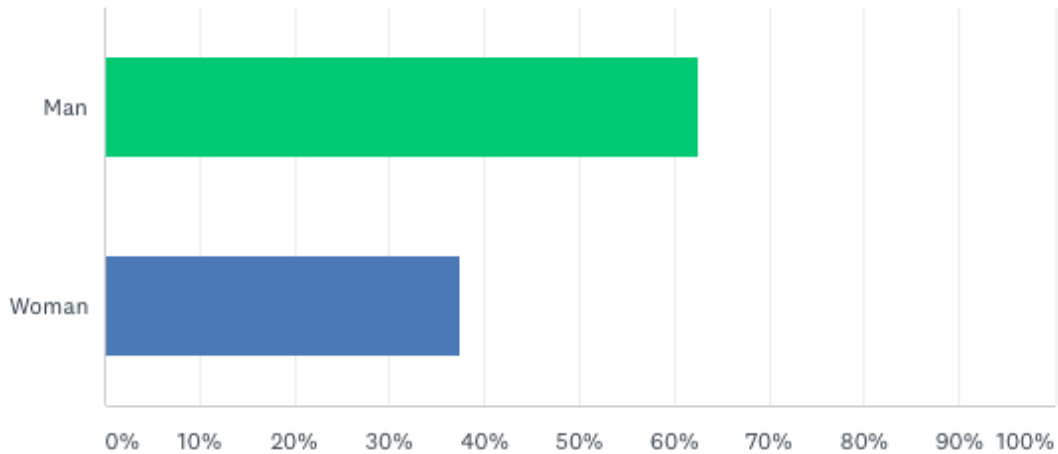


Figure 2.5 Gender Identity of Special District Board Directors

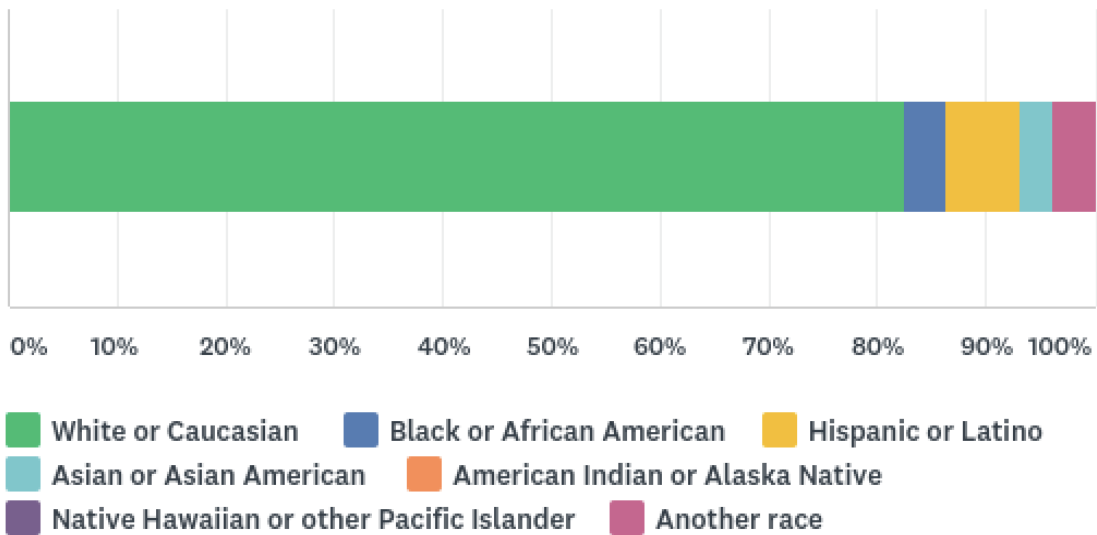


Figure 2.6 Ethnicity Identification of Special District Board Directors

The demographic data obtained pertaining to age, gender, and race and ethnicity provides a reference of the types of people who typically serve on special district boards in California. Nearly 80% of the special district board directors who participated in the survey were 55 years or older. The top 3 answers reported were: (1) 65 to 74 (37%), (2) 55 to 64 (29%), and (3) 75 or

older (15%). Of the various age groups, 75 or older had the largest population of appointed special district board directors. Conversely, when combined, the two lowest age groupings (18 to 24 and 25 to 34) only accounted for 4% of special district board directors. All research inquiries, which utilize a variety of survey methods, are destined to produce errors that further research studies may improve upon. The survey question regarding gender is one of those errors made in this study. There were two options made available to participants of the study when asked about gender identity: male or female. The survey mistakenly did not include the many other different gender identities, including transgender, gender-neutral, non-binary, pangender, etc. The split between the two options available to participants regarding gender identification culminated with a majority (63%) identifying as male and 37% as female. Yet, the least amount of variation in responses to the questions asked throughout the entire survey derives from the subject matter asking about race and ethnicity. A sizable number (83%) of California special district board directors identify as White or Caucasian, while the next largest ethnic group was Hispanic/Latino with only 7%.

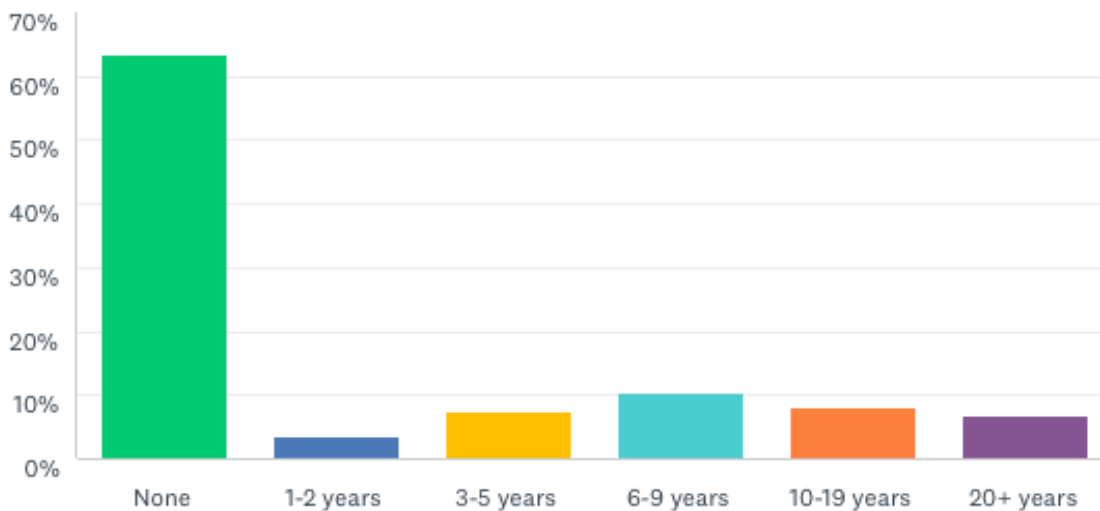


Figure 2.7 Years of Prior Political Experience of Appointed and Elected Positions

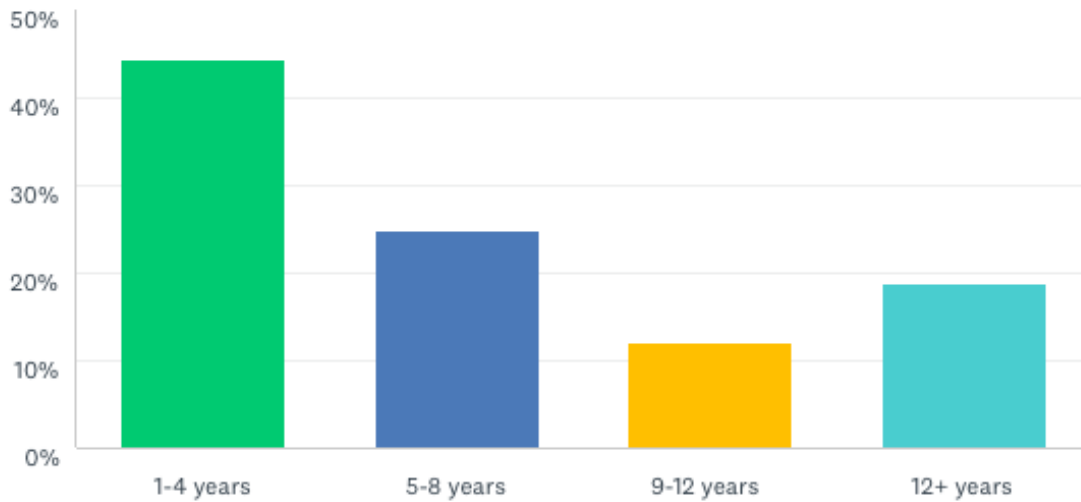


Figure 2.8 Years Served on Current Special District Board

One of the overriding questions to this research pertains to whether special district boards are routinely occupied with political newcomers seeking higher political offices or seasoned politicians who retain involvement in local policymaking. The results of the survey demonstrate that a large majority (63%) of special district board directors did not have any political experience, elected or appointed, prior to serving on their special district board. All of the different types of special districts (fire, water, cemetery, library, etc.) had a respondent claim that they had no political experience prior to serving on their board. However, a quarter of the respondents stated that they had 6 or more years of political experience. A plurality (44%) of special district board directors is serving their first term. The lengthiest longevity where special district board directors have continually served for more than 12 years on their current special district occurs most frequently in water and recreation and parks districts. Local political boards are often seen as stepping-stones for ambitious political novices, and special districts seem to fit that category of a local governing board. Most special district board directors answered “no” when asked if they would be seeking other political offices in the future. Nevertheless, nearly a

quarter (24%) affirmed that they have interests in serving in other types of political offices. Of the special district board directors who stated interests in seeking additional political offices, 33% identified as female, 72% as White or Caucasian, and 48% as below the age of 55. The special district board directors who claimed to have interests in running or seeking additional political offices tended to have no prior experience (60%) before serving on their current special district board. Appointed special district board directors accounted for 12% of the participants who indicated future political ambitions. The two most prevalent types of special district with board directors seeking further political offices in the future, subsequent their time on their current special district board, were sanitation and recreation and parks. An additional question was asked to participants who responded “yes” to having interests in serving in other political offices to specify which political office they intend on pursuing. Please see Figure 2.9 for the most common responses.



Figure 2.9 Wordcloud of Special District Board Directors’ Political Ambitions

On August 4, 1950, public-spirited citizens met at a local restaurant in Apple Valley, California named The Branding Iron to hear the results of a report that took nearly a year of preparation by the Fire Protection Committee. This report marked the beginning of the formation of the Apple Valley Fire Protection District (AVFPD). The AVFPD is an independent special district that was formed by the consent of the voters in 1951. When originally formed, the fire district encompassed approximately 26 square miles and served a population of less than 6,000 residents. As of 2020, the AVFPD serves over 94,000 citizens, covers 206 square miles, employs 42 full-time firefighters, and possesses a district budget of \$12.4 million.

In 1997, the fire district was in need of additional funding for personnel and paramedics. As a result, the citizens passed a 20-year special tax measure (Measure V) to secure necessary funding for the fire district. Towards the expiration of Measure V, the AVFPD had to close 2 out of the 5 fire stations after the loss of property value caused by the 2008 Recession. The fire district's main source of revenue stems from property taxes, and due to the drop in property value, the district was unable to operate at the current funding levels without cuts in services and personnel. The closure of the two fire stations and downsizing of staff prompted the creation of yet another tax measure committee to pass a special tax to ensure the stability and longevity of the fire district's capacity to serve the residents.

A parcel tax is a form of property tax assessment and is considered a qualified special tax in California. These taxes may be imposed by a local government such a city, school district, county, or special district. Special taxes are permitted by the California Constitution and must obtain a two-thirds (66.67%) supermajority vote for approval for cities, counties, special districts,

and school districts<sup>3</sup>. The initial attempt to pass the special tax, Measure G, failed in 2014 with 59.38% of the voters approving the measure. The AVFPD board directors decided to attempt the passage of one more tax measures in 2016 to reopen the closed fire stations and add more firefighters to the organization. On November 8, 2016, Measure A (special tax) was approved by 77.45% of the voters, surpassing the supermajority threshold of two-thirds (66.67%) necessary for its passage. With the passage of Measure A, 911 response times improved, additional full-time firefighters were hired to help respond to multiple emergencies, and the two previously closed fire stations were reopened. As of 2019, the fire district's main revenue source (approximately 52%) comes from property taxes paid to the County Tax Collector's office, while the special tax from Measure A accounts for almost 40% of the 2018-2019 fiscal year's district revenue.

Two years after the passage of Measure A, two out of five AVFPD board directors were up for reelection. The two board directors were Bob Tinsley and Jay Jeffs. No political polls were conducted prior to the election, but one can assume that the citizens of the fire district most likely held favorable opinions of the incumbent board directors, as they were the catalysts who approved Measure A to be a ballot measure in 2016 which an overwhelming majority of voters approved. For the special tax, Measure A, to be placed on the ballot for a vote by the residents, it first had to be approved by the governing officials (AVFPD board directors). One can make the claim that the AVFPD governing board in 2016, including Director Tinsley and Vice President Jeffs, had been satisfying a majority of the voters' preferences in Apple Valley, as they were in agreement with the residents on the most critical issue facing the fire district since its creation in 1951. In the next election after the passage Measure A in 2018, two individuals filed for

<sup>3</sup> Proposition 39 of California permits California school districts to only achieve a 55% voter approval for special taxes, and bonds to fund construction, reconstruction, rehabilitation, or replacement of facilities including the furnishing and equipping of schools, or the acquisition or lease of real property vote.

candidacy with San Bernardino County Registrar of Voters, signaling their intent to challenge the two sitting incumbents on the AVFPD, Director Tinsley and Vice President Jeffs.

Director Tinsley and Vice President Jeffs were completely surprised that they would be facing challengers in the 2018 election, as they had successfully drafted and passed a special tax measure with the approval of 77% of voters. Measure A allowed for two previously closed fire stations to open, lowered 911 response times, and permitted the hiring of additional full-time firefighters. The product outcomes of Measure A were celebrated by the residents of Apple Valley and had very few, if any, dissenters. These circumstances led Director Tinsley and Vice President Jeffs to believe that they would not face any challengers in the November 2018 election.

I thought it was going to be another election where Bob and I would place our names on the ballot without any other candidates filing for candidacy. Or at least any viable candidates filing for candidacy. It is fairly rare to have multiple challengers, if any challengers, for the fire district board. The residents overwhelmingly voted in favor of the special tax that allowed the district to open up the two closed fire stations. We took care of the most pressing issues facing Apple Valley and the fire district. (Jay Jeffs)

Well you always have to expect something unusual to happen in local politics. I just didn't think it was going to be during this election after the successful passage of Measure A. It was not easy to try and get 66.6% of residents to agree on something, especially something like a tax increase. But we got the word to the residents and they agreed that we needed to reopen the two closed fire stations. (Bob Tinsley)

The two candidates who challenged the two incumbents were Aaron Conley and Colleen Kuhn. Mr. Conley did not have any prior political experience while Mrs. Kuhn had served on various boards and had previously served on the AVFPD board from July 2002 to July 2006. Mr. Conley was a 13-year deputy sheriff for the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, while Mrs. Kuhn had experience in law enforcement and served as a paramedic. Mrs. Kuhn also



worked for the State Commissioner for California's Emergency Services Authority, which oversees all emergency medical services including first aid, paramedics, and air and ground medical transport to emergency hospitals. Director Tinsley and Vice President Jeffs were both local business owners in Apple Valley dealing with development and the manufacturing of mailboxes, respectively.

What made you decide to run for the Apple Valley Fire Protection District in 2018? (Brett)

It was the fire guys. It was the firefighters. They asked me if I would be willing to run for the seat again. What I did was, everything the fire guys had told me and everything I was watching made me want to do some additional research and look into running for the fire board again. I had some heart-to-heart with the guys on the floor (active firefighters) as well as retirees from the district. Originally, when I first sat on the fire board back in 2006, I only left the board because the State Commissioner for California's Emergency Services Authority stated that I was unable to participate in both agencies at the same time. There would be a conflict of interest that would not allow me to serve in both capacities. I made the decision that I could make a difference for the better in Apple Valley and the district, and that I should run for the fire district. (Kuhn)

What made you decide to run for the Apple Valley Fire Protection District in 2018? (Brett)

My dad was an Apple Valley firefighter in the 1970s, and I have always felt close to the fire district. Most of the guys on the fire department right now I went to school with, and being stationed in Apple Valley as a deputy sheriff, I wanted to find new ways to be involved in the community. I was approached a couple of years ago by the former Fire Chief, Sid Hultquist, about possibly running for the board. That information got relayed back to the president of the union that represents the Apple Valley firefighters (Shane Simpson), who reached out to me asking if I would be interested in running for the board in 2018. (Conley)

The AVFPD has a professional firefighters association acting as a union that represents the firefighters in negotiations regarding collective bargaining agreements. The Apple Valley Professional Firefighters Association (AVPFA) consists of 42 members and is a member of the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF 4742). The IAFF is the leading lobby group

representing firefighters and emergency services in Washington, D.C. and state capitols throughout the U.S. The AVPFA has a registered political action committee (PAC) with the San Bernardino County Registrar of Voters, from which portions of its membership dues help fund. The AVPFA PAC endorsed, financially supported, and helped pass Measure A along with other local initiatives and candidates. The AVPFA has made use of their PAC by supporting town council candidates, county supervisors, and other political offices in the area. During the 2018 AVFPD election, the AVPFA endorsed and made financial contributions and expenditures in support of both candidates, Mrs. Kuhn and Mr. Conley.

The most fundamental function of a campaign “is to inform voters about the choices before them and to mobilize citizen participation” (Norris et al, 1999). Campaigns spend vast amounts of money on political advertising in each election cycle. The primary objective of these communication attempts is typically to increase the likelihood that a voter will recognize and ultimately support the sponsoring candidate on Election Day. The AVPFA spent a total of \$23,970 between the two candidates, Conley and Kuhn. Mr. Conley did not raise any additional funds outside of the AVPFA contributions towards his campaign, while Mrs. Kuhn participated in a few minor fundraising activities.

Did you raise any additional funds outside of the donations made by the AVPFA?  
(Brett)

No, I only used the money from the AVPFA. (Conley)

Did you raise any additional funds outside of the donations made by the AVPFA?  
(Brett)

I did, I had a couple meet-and-greets where I was able to receive some campaign contributions. It was really small fundraising. I only took in approximately \$800, and when I closed out my campaign committee, I donated the residual funds back to a charity the AVPFA supports. (Kuhn)

The total of \$23,970 was split evenly between the two challengers and funded expenditures towards candidate statements, campaign signs, mailers, media advertisements, and social events. The two incumbents, Tinsely and Jeffs, opted not to raise any campaign funds.

Description	Expenditures	Candidate Kuhn	Candidate Conley
Candidate Statements	\$3,000	\$1,500	\$1,500
Campaign Signs	\$11,258	\$5,629	\$5,629
Mailers	\$8,576	\$4,288	\$4,288
Media Advertisements	\$136	\$68	\$68
Social Events	\$604	\$302	\$302
Miscellaneous	\$396	\$198	\$198

Figure 2.10 Campaign Expenditures for Candidates Kuhn and Conley

Why didn't you choose to fundraise for the AVFPD election? (Brett)

I didn't believe I could win without the support of the AVPFA and honestly felt that I did what I needed to do to keep the fire district going with the passage of Measure A. (Jeffs)

Why didn't you choose to fundraise for the AVFPD election? (Brett)

Campaigns are a tricky business, and if the AVPFA wanted new people on the board, then they have the absolute right to support whomever they want. I did my best serving the board and the district over the years, and what I really cared about was the passage of Measure A. I did not want to get in a heated campaign so I decided to place my name on the ballot and let the chips fall where they may. (Tinsley)

Since the late 1960s, political scientists have debated vigorously over the issue of incumbency advantage, mostly focusing on congressional elections, but have also demonstrated its existence within state and local elections. The list of potential causes is extensive and includes

pork barrel spending, redistricting, campaign finances, congressional-bureaucratic relations, and declining party identifications. The conventional wisdom within the literature argues that legislative incumbents have electoral advantages (Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2002). Over the past 20 years, holding office added an average of 8 % to a candidate's margin (Rakich, 2018). The case study of the 2018 AVFPD election presented a thought-provoking situation regarding incumbency advantage. The two incumbents, Tinsely and Jeffs, theoretically had an electoral advantage by letting voters know that they were the current board directors on the ballot. The San Bernardino County Registrar of Voters permits candidates to place their occupation below their name on the voter's ballot. If they are seeking reelection for a position, which they currently hold, they are allowed to place "incumbent" in place of their occupation. Tinsely and Jeffs diverged on whether to place "incumbent" underneath their name on the voter ballot, which presents a unique opportunity to examine this specific case of voting behavior and elections. At the discretion of both candidates, the title of "incumbent" was the designated title for Bob Tinsley, while Jay Jeffs opted to place "business owner" as the designated title on the voter ballot.

What title did you have placed under your name on the voter ballot, and why?  
(Brett)

I had 'incumbent' placed for mine. I did so because I was the incumbent and I thought it would be best. (Tinsley)

What title did you have placed under your name on the voter ballot, and why?  
(Brett)

I went back and forth between placing 'incumbent' and 'business owner.' I thought people don't like politicians, because sometimes I don't like the people who are currently in office, plus we live in a conservative area, so I thought putting 'business owner' would add more legitimacy to my name as I have had success running my business. (Jeffs)

All of the candidates—Tinsely, Jeffs, Kuhn, and Conley—mentioned throughout their interviews that they had participated in various meet-and-greets and speaking invitations leading up to the election. The election results placed the incumbents, Tinsely and Jeffs, in third and fourth. The top two candidates with the most votes—the winners of the 2018 AVFPD election—were the challengers, Kuhn and Conley. The challengers had defeated the established incumbents. The election had over 35,000 votes cast with Kuhn receiving 32.90% and Conley 30.08%. The two incumbents lost by large deficits, with Tinsley receiving 22.73% and Jeffs—who in contrast to Tinsely did not place “incumbent” on the voter ballot—only received 14.29%, an 8-point difference between the two incumbents.

### ***Discussion***

The goal of this study was to explore and examine the composition, representation, political experience, and future aspirations of California special district board directors. The research carried out will provide a better understanding of the composition and characteristics of the individuals who serve on California special district boards. The data obtained throughout this study offers an exclusive perspective of how representative the current composition of special district boards truly is and whether they are indeed reflective of the residents they represent and serve. The levels of political experience and ambition were analyzed to help determine whether special districts are being used as political stepping-stones for ambitious office holders or final resting places for seasoned politicians. The results from the survey shed light on the most common political offices sought from special district board directors as well as the variance among the responses. A critical point of the research study was the successful observation and investigation into the foremost case study of a special district election. The novel case study

involved a 2018 southern California fire protection special district board election where two candidates supported by a powerful public safety union challenged two incumbents with high approval ratings. The findings originating from the case study will contribute to the continual pursuit of knowledge regarding local elections and voting behavior.

The major findings from the survey research begin with the composition and representation aspects of California special district board directors. The response rate from the various types of special districts was not uniform but was similar to the prevalence of types of special districts throughout California. For example, the top three types of special district board directors who participated were from fire (1), water (2), and recreation and parks (3) districts, while the three most numerous types of special districts in California are fire (1), water (2), and recreation and parks (3). The results culminating from the inquiry into the frequency at which elected special district board members face challengers in special district board elections signals moderate levels of competition. The consequences originating from only moderate levels of competition can seriously affect policy and organization, as the principle of open competition underlines America's free enterprise system and its system of elections.

Representation within special district boards was analyzed to decipher how representative the individuals serving on governing boards truly are with respect to residents living in California. One of the largest incongruences between the numbers in survey data obtained and actual California residents dealt with the age of the special district board directors. The overwhelming majority (79%) of special district board directors are 55 years or older. The largest group, age 65-74 (39%), is drastically over-represented, as they only account for 8.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) of California residents. One of the reasons causing these discrepancies in representation could be due to the fact that many individuals 65 years and older

are retired, allowing them more time and resources to participate in local politics. In congruence with this theory, the largest grouping age of residents in California is 25-34 (15%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) but only account for 2.24% of special district board directors, most likely due to the constraints placed on that age group with career advancement, marriage, and child rearing.

The difference between genders represented on special district boards was marginal in comparison to the number of women versus men serving public office throughout the U.S. The survey reported 37.4% identified as women while the percentage of women in elective office in 2018 for U.S. Congress was 20.6%, statewide elective 23.7%, and state legislatures 25.4%. The larger percentage of individuals identifying as women could be a signal that women are participating in local governance more frequently. Women may be using special districts as starting points in their political careers and attempting to run for higher political offices after serving on special district boards. A trend is present showing the higher the political office, the lower the percentage of women serving. This indicates that women are more likely to serve on a special district at higher rates than most other political offices. The survey may have over-sampled women, altering the actual number of women serving on special district boards. Further research may acquire a dataset more reflective of the individuals serving on special district boards to enable a more representative figure of women serving on them. The number of individuals who identified as white via the survey were significantly larger than the percentage of California residents who identify as white. Eighty-three percent of the survey respondents identified their race/ethnicity as white, whereas according to the U.S Census, white only comprises 37% of California residents (2012). If the survey numbers are valid, then the factors leading to the large disparity between minorities and whites participating on special district boards could be due various factors, including higher transaction costs for minorities in society.

Minorities are much more likely to work outside of their city of residence, earn less money, and work multiple jobs. These factors and more can contribute to minorities' being under-represented in California special district boards. Alternatively, this disparity could be due to an under-sampling of minorities and over-sampling of white special district board directors. A more robust database would assist with providing a sharper assessment of the types of demographics and characteristics that special district board directors possess.

Do special districts serve as a unique purpose for novice politicians with ambitious political goals or as a venue for senior political elites to continue shaping public policy in their community? This was the initial inquiry that began this research project. Individuals who seek a career in public office tend to participate in local political offices during their early stages in politics. After serving on a local governing board, it is common for individuals who seek higher offices to run for county, state, or federal offices. A sizeable majority (63%) stated they did not have any political experience, appointed or elected, prior to serving on their current special district board. This finding is noteworthy, as it demonstrates that special districts are indeed being used as entry-level positions for serving in public office. Individuals without any prior political experience of holding an elected or appointed position pursue special district boards as an avenue to serve in public office. It also appears that the voters in special districts do not require their preferred candidate(s) running for special districts to have prior political experience holding an elected position. The same can be argued for appointed positions to special districts, as there were twice as many appointed special district board directors that claimed they did not have any prior political experience before serving on their current special district boards.

With it being known that special districts act as a sort of shallow end of the pool for political novices, the follow-up question is whether or not special district board directors have



ambitions to seek higher political offices in the future. A large percentage (76%) of respondents to the survey stated that they did not have an interest in seeking other political offices after serving on their current special district boards. This finding is significant for that large of a majority of special district board directors with no prior political experience to lack interest in pursuing other political offices. This could be due to the fact that an overwhelming majority of special district board directors are over the age of 55 and prefer to participate in part-time political offices rather than higher political offices (county, state or federal) that necessitate extensive time and energy. Even though a majority of special district board directors claim to not be seeking any other political offices, the actual percentage might be slightly lower for the reason that survey respondents may not want to publicly profess their desire to run for other political offices, as the connotations that accompany such ideas tend to be seen as negative by the public. Nevertheless, virtually a quarter (24%) asserted that they have interests in serving in other types of political offices. Of the special district board directors who stated interests in seeking additional political offices, 60% did not have any political experience before serving on their current special district boards. The top three political offices sought after by special district board directors are: (1) city council, (2) county board of supervisors, and (3) state assembly.

The case study of the AVFPD election of 2018 offers plenty of insights and findings regarding local elections, voting behavior, and special districts. The elections placed two favorable incumbents, Bob Tinsley and Jay Jeffs, against two challengers, Aaron Conley and Colleen Kuhn. In accordance with the survey results, which asserts fire districts “rarely” have challengers in elections, the frequency of AVFPD elections does not deviate from this claim. The last election for the AVFPD was held in 2010, even though portions of the AVFPD board directors are up for election every two years. As with all elections, voters need information to

make a decision on who to cast their ballot for, and local elections are no different. Local elections are normally seen as low-information races for an array of reasons, including less news coverage by television and newspapers and less campaign expenditures on advertisements in comparison to state and federal races. Additionally, voters typically know more information about candidates running for higher political offices. The contrast between the information dissemination of the challengers supported by the AVPFA and the incumbents is evident. The incumbents did not hold any fundraisers or expend any funds on campaign advertisements. In contrast, the challengers, Conley and Kuhn, had \$23,970 contributed to their campaigns by the AVPFA for various campaign expenditures, including mailers sent to over 6,500 high propensity voting homes in the fire district, campaign signs, and candidate statements placed in the voter's guide and ballot. Without additional campaign resources such as mailers, campaign statements, campaign signs, a majority of voters did not have any knowledge of the two incumbents, Tinsley and Jeffs. With the lack of campaign information, it was extremely difficult for voters to cast a ballot in favor of the incumbents unless they had previous knowledge of either Tinsley or Jeffs. Voters need information to make a decision and prefer information gained through the least amount of transaction costs involved. The funding offered by AVPFA allowed Kuhn and Conley to assist voters seeking to make a decision by providing easily consumable information at a low transaction cost to the voters in the form of mailers, campaign signs, and candidate statements. The political information made possible by the AVPFA acted as a heuristic for the voters and enabled them to cast their ballot in favor of their preferred candidate. No other interest group or candidate in the election met these levels of campaign expenditures made by the AVPFA.

This indicates that one motivated group, the AVPFA, was able to disproportionately affect the outcome of the election for the reason that there were no counter-balancing interest groups.

This type of scenario where a single interest group financially supports, endorses, and campaigns for candidate(s) may be more prevalent among special districts than suspected. Further research is needed to support this claim as to the frequency of such incidences where a single interest group overpowers any other potential interest groups or candidates in local elections, specifically within special districts. This case study provides evidence and descriptions of certain electoral practices, but further analysis is needed to ensure its validity. While the actions taken forth by the AVPFA were legal and did not violate any electoral or campaign laws or regulations, the regularity of these electoral scenarios amongst special districts could have significant effects on our democratic practices occurring in our local level of governance.

### ***Conclusion***

This research intended to investigate the composition and representation of California special district board directors. The study's scope quickly expanded to include an exploration into the range of political experiences held by special district board directors as well as their future political aspirations. The final aspect of the study included an intriguing case study that demonstrates the power of a single interest group in a low-information election. It was hoped that these similar but different themes regarding inquiries of special districts would present significant findings to better understand and expand our knowledge of local political representation and election behavior. This research made use of quantitative research methods by way of survey distribution. The surveys were distributed to different types of special districts throughout the entire state to ensure the most representative population in the study. Accompanying the quantitative methods were the qualitative aspects to enhance the validity of the study's findings, such as the inclusion of interviews with a variety of sources including

incumbent fire board directors, their challengers, and interest groups. The results of the survey research present a snapshot in time of the common characteristics and demographics of California special district board directors, but further research can improve upon the established scholarly work.

The survey distributed to the special district board directors could have been designed with additional data points and disseminated in a manner which may have resulted in a higher turnout rate amongst participants. The fewest number of participants from the survey derived from mosquito and vector control districts with only a single respondent. Future research can improve upon this study by acquiring more participants from districts with the three lowest response rates: utility, cemetery, and mosquito and vector control. The survey also under-sampled the number of appointed board directors by approximately 10%, but this disparity is minimal and likely does not affect the reliability of the overall data collected by the participants. An additional point of interest in reference to the descriptive characteristics of special district board directors that was not examined but should have been included was of the varying levels of education attained by participants in the study. This information could have helped provide more data to the growing literature of pre- and post-political careers as well as supplied this study an additional variable to analyze. This study was also constrained by the lack of accessible data in terms of contact information. This drawback could have been avoided by acquiring a database similar to the one CSDA has, with extensive contact information (email and phone numbers) of California special district board directors.

Future research on special districts might apply a similar analysis with different methodological approaches to ensure this study's findings are accurate. However, until there is another method for obtaining the essential data regarding contact information of special district

board directors, it is expected that the results would be similar. Supplementary research on special districts could analyze the composition and representation of other states in a comparative study, as well as test the expectation that special districts are regularly being used as starting points for many eager politicians. Depending on the state, special districts may be viewed as more vital or less vital to the general public. A comparative case study between the states is an area of research worth exploring.

The case study of the AVFPD 2018 election provided new understandings pertaining to special districts, including how a single interest group—without counter-balancing interest groups—can have significant impacts on an election. Future research should investigate whether this phenomenon is an outlier or considered a more regular occurrence in special district elections. Further study is needed to determine the prevalence of special district employee unions or groups actively seeking out candidates and supporting them financially in their campaigns for special district boards. A point worth noting is that, per the survey question regarding the frequency of challengers in special district elections, fire districts had the highest frequency of respondents claiming that incumbents “rarely” had challengers in their elections, yet the case study of the special district election was a fire district. Additionally, researchers may want to evaluate any differences amongst the varieties of special district types in California.

At the most general level, the results presented in this analysis highlight the importance of conducting research on special districts, representation, and local election behavior. The results of this study are not invulnerable to criticism; such criticisms expand our understandings of special districts as we improve upon our research and methods. Hopefully, this study will act as a baseline to initiate further discussion and additional research and broaden our knowledge regarding representation and elections of special districts.

## CHAPTER 3

Trends:

History, Clustering, and Partisanship

## ***Introduction***

For the past few decades, special districts have increased severely both in their numbers and services provided throughout the United States. Nationally, the proliferation of special districts is increasing, totaling 38,266 according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2012 Census of Governments. Special districts are established to provide special types of public services that tend to not be offered by municipalities (Burns 1994). Special districts can provide an array of public services including fire protection, water, sanitation, library, cemetery, airport, harbor, mosquito abatement, healthcare, and related services. In California, the number of special districts peaked in 1997, plateaued, and is currently falling marginally. Throughout California's history there has been a robust relationship between special districts and the state dating back to the Legislature's passage of the Wright Act of 1887. Since then we have witnessed special districts being utilized in every county throughout the state. For the purpose of this paper, the analysis of special districts will focus on the history, trends, and clustering of California independent special districts, which total approximately 1,947 (2019). An additional statistical analysis was employed to test expectations regarding special districts on the national level. The statistical analysis tested, while keeping the states' population constant, whether or not ideologically conservative states were more likely to opt to establish a significant number of special districts as a form of government to deliver public services.

In the 1800s, the Central Valley, which was once an area of abundant agriculture, was limited to dry farms and low-value crops. Local farmers wanted to tap into the water supply of the Tuolumne River, and the farmers themselves used their division of land as collateral to build dams (Senate Local Government Committee, 2016). Under the Wright Act of 1887, the farmers were able to establish the Turlock Irrigation District in Stanislaus County. The Wright Act

permitted landowners to create new public entities to provide irrigation water and fund their activities with water rates and bond sales (California Special District Association, 2016). Ultimately, this legal foundation opened the door for all different types of special districts to become established and begin operation. The newly formed special district, the Turlock Irrigation District, became the first special district in California and allowed the local farmers to expand and diversify their crops (California Special District Association, 2016). In 2019, with a population nearing 40 million, water districts still supply approximately 90% of developed water in the state.

After the passage of the Wright Act of 1887, the legislature continued to develop new types of special districts as instruments to help residents come together to solve community problems. Special districts became very popular and were hailed as tools to provide needed public services without the complex bureaucracies that often accompany larger general-purpose governments. A common theme became apparent throughout California's history. Special districts enabled residents to find local solutions to fit the specific needs of their community. California's rules and regulations outlining the requirements needed to establish special districts once again gave power to the citizens.

As previously mentioned, each state has the sole governing authority over the rules and regulations guiding special districts. I will provide some of the basic regulations in regard to the establishment and operations of special districts in California. Local voters are the individuals who create special districts, typically when the residents observe a specific need in public services that is not being provided appropriately. The first step in the process of establishing a special district is for the residents to gather signatures for a petition. The petition is then given to the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCo), which is responsible for reviewing all



proposed special districts in California (Senate Local Government Committee, 2010). If the LAFCo approves the formation of the special district, it will subsequently be put to a vote, and the voters will make the final decision. If the LAFCo denies the application for the proposed special district, the voters have an opportunity to override their decision through a method known as “protest hearing” (Senate Local Government Committee, 2010). Most special districts are formed via the voters, but alternatively and infrequently, the state legislature has the authority to establish special districts as well. Residents within the special district’s boundaries typically elect the board of directors, but sometimes, the board of directors can be appointed by the county board of supervisors or city council members. Depending on the type of special district and its bylaws, term limits may be placed on the representatives who sit on the board of directors.

Independent special districts provide public services to their constituents, but how do special districts raise funds to operate and provide these services? Generally, most independent special districts receive a majority of their funding through property taxes levied by the county. This ensures that local property tax revenues remain in the community. Property taxes allow for a stable financial foundation for a great number of independent special districts. This foundation enables independent special districts to build and maintain the infrastructure required to sustain a strong financial well-being for the organization, allowing the continual flow of services to be provided to the residents.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section, I place the literature review, where the history, theoretical, and methodological advances in the study of special districts and their proliferation, necessity, and limitations are discussed. In the second section, I present the methodological approaches and framework that is employed. I will present my variables and the data that was used during the empirical analysis. A mixed methods approach enhanced the

validity of the project by having the quantitative aspects complemented by qualitative contributions. The results of the statistical analysis are presented and accompanied by figures to illustrate the findings. The last section concludes and discusses further areas of research that could be studied with respect to special districts, their efficacy, and what the future holds for the most prevalent form of government in California and throughout the U.S.

### ***Literature Review***

The cornerstone of special district research and literature revolves around Nancy Burns (1994) and her prolific work that took place more than two decades ago and offers an explanation as to why special districts were proliferating throughout the United States. Burns proposed the “political economy” framework that has become the prevailing explanation for understanding the formation of local governments. She argues that individuals create new governments in order to acquire access to the powers and capabilities attached to these units. The choice between establishing a special district or municipal government is decided by determining whether its proponents seek zoning powers (Burns, 1994). The ability to exclude individuals or activities from the jurisdiction by means of zoning policies is essentially the only authority remaining exclusive to general-purpose local governments. It is when this authority is desired that forming a municipal government, rather than a special district, is the rational choice.

For example, individuals seek additional special districts to fulfill their service demands when local general-purpose governments are inept. “A private entrepreneur is interested in obtaining abundant resources and accessing the powers of new governments” (Shi, 2016). Burns (1994) argues that preference toward the establishment of new local governments actually ought to be given to the establishment of new general-purpose governments when local actors seek

exclusion or zoning power. However, when state laws and regulations inhibit general-purpose governments, special districts act as a type of financial tactic for existing general-purpose governments to continue providing services (Burns, 1994).

Burns' (1994) theoretical framework leads researchers to the vital importance of local government authority and autonomy in relation to the powers and capacities of general-purpose governments within the state. Scholars have continued to utilize Burns' (1994) political economy framework to investigate the effect of fiscal limits on the creation and establishment of special districts (Foster 1997; McCabe 1997; Feiock and Carr 2001; Carr 2006; Frammer 2010; Carr and Frammer 2011). Connolly et al. (2010) suggested that local tax revolts have destabilized local autonomy due to the fact that they cause property tax limits to be placed on municipalities' main sources of revenue stream, which in turn restricts the municipalities' ability to provide services that citizens are requesting. Consequently, one leading explanation for the establishment of special districts is that state-imposed institutional constraints, such as laws and regulations, on local government municipalities have increased the necessity of special districts to fill those gaps of services (MacManus 1981; Bollens 1987; Nelson 1990; McCabe 200; Feoick and Carr 2001).

Because of the work of these researchers and others, we now better understand that particular fiscal limitations have effects reaching beyond the capacities and powers allotted to local governments. These fiscal limitations have similarly worn down the autonomy of general-purpose governments and have led to the creation and proliferation of special districts. The taxing and debt-issuing capabilities of independent special districts aid local municipalities to circumvent TELs (tax and expenditure limits) and debt limits instituted by state and local governments and thus generate further revenue. Furthermore, a handful of researchers emphasize

the power of county home rule in explaining the increase in the number of special districts across the U.S. (Bollens 1987; McCabe 200; Feiock and Carr 2001).

One of the dominant scholarships focusing on the creation of special districts proposes that the establishment of special districts is an institutional innovation that permits local municipalities specific flexibility in complying with state restrictions and TELs while allowing them to make changes to maintain services (Bowler and Donovan 2004). Creating special districts in the local public sector might be an option for general-purpose government as an “unintended consequence” of state tax and expenditure limits (Bowler & Donovan, 2004). Other scholars found that TELs had an effect on the increased use of debt (Bahl and Duncombe 1993), on alterations in local and state revenue structure (Mullins and Joyce 1996), and on added reliance on user fees and charges (Lowery 1983; Sharp and Elkins 1987). The conclusions reached by these studies indicate that local actors can adjust to the fiscal restraints of TELs by altering a state’s governance structure, changing the mix of local and state revenue sources, or rearranging the types and number of local government units that provide services to the public (Bowler and Donovan 2004).

When a state imposes these constraints on local municipalities, local officials can choose to alter the institutional structure by increasing the establishment of special districts. Bowler and Donovan (2004) discovered that one of the unintended consequences of state TELs is a change in state institutional structure and an increase in new local political jurisdictions. State TELs increase the likelihood of the creation of new special districts, but only under circumstances in which the state allows ballot initiatives that are relatively easy to administer. The study concluded that the interaction between incentives, TELs, and the population’s anti-tax position

permitted greater initiatives to state governments to depend on a larger range of monetary innovations, such as various types of special districts' government units.

Most of the research conducted in regard to special districts from MacManus (1981) until presently offered similar theories as to why special districts were being created, such as a means to circumvent fiscal restrictions (Bowler and Donovan 2004; Carr 2004; Carr 2006; Frammer 2010; Feiock and Carr 2001, Foster 1997; Carr and Farmer 2011; and McCabe 2000). Carr and Frammer (2011) argue that "circumvention" is a complex issue for local governments. Municipalities and counties are less likely to be able to provide the services requested by individuals when local general-purpose revenues are limited by TELs. In this scenario, local municipalities must move some of their fiscal and service liabilities to special district governments. Shi (2016) claims in her article, "The Rise of Specialized Governance in American Federalism," that the growth of special districts is in response to state laws constraining government autonomy of general-purpose governments (p. 99).

However, inquiries into the effect of fiscal limitations on the increase in the utilization of special districts have not been fully resolved. There are conflicting arguments on the effect of fiscal limitations on the increase of special districts (Lewis 2000; Berry 2009; Carr and Frammer 2011). California's Proposition 13 property tax on local government units was studied by Lewis (2000), and it was discovered that Proposition 13 did not change local government structures in California, and the increase in the number of special districts has been temperate since the 1970s. The inference stemming from the Lewis study is that "city and county governments are able to address new issues and adapt to changes in their fiscal environments if they have sufficient capacity to handle such changes" (Shi 2016). Another scholar, Berry (2009), came to a similar result and theory as that of Lewis (2000) when he studied the existence of restrictions on the

quantity of special districts in states. There is no evidence that is drawn from Berry's (2009) study to back the relationship between the quantity of special districts in states and the TELs forced by the states on local governments. Carr and Farmer (2011) argued "there was a contingent effect of restrictive state TELs on county governments, but not on municipal governments." There has yet to be a consensus on the relationship between fiscal limits and the number of special districts; further research is needed on this issue.

Burns' (1994) framework has prompted many other scholars to examine the relationship between the degree of home rule offered by state governments to local governments and the creation of special districts. Home rule is "the power of a local government to conduct its own affairs, including specifically the power to determine its own organization, the functions it performs, its taxing and borrowing authority, and the numbers, types, and employment conditions of its personnel" (Advisory Commission in Intergovernmental Relations 'ACIR', 1981). Throughout McCabe's (2000) research, she was able to uncover the vital importance of county power and authority in the processes of creating special districts. McCabe argued that special districts are less likely to be created when states allow counties to utilize home rule powers. She also discovered that those states placing tax and expenditures restrictions on local general-purpose governments were more likely to witness an increase in the number of special districts being established.

Carr (2006) conducted a study into the effect of local government autonomy on the number of special districts in states, but the study did not consider local fiscal autonomy in terms of fiscal importance, revenue diversification, and the influence of local government structure. The link between local government autonomy and the growth of special districts identified by Carr (2006) has made the formation of special districts a vital topic for federalism scholarship.

The literature on fiscal limitations and home rule is especially pertinent due to the fact that these variables are associated with the decision of whether or not a special district should be established. Notwithstanding, over the past decade there has gradually been more attention paid by scholars to the creation, effects, and efficiency of special districts, but there is still much to understand about these units of government.

*Tracing Special Districts to California's Population History*

In 1900, California had less than 2 million people residing within the state; by 1950, the number of people had nearly quintupled to 10 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). California experienced tremendous growth that persisted throughout the rest of the 20th century, making it the most populous state in the United States. The continual influx of migrants throughout the 20th century, along with an expansion of governmental services being provided, paved the way for thousands of independent special districts to be established. As migrants flocked to new and old cities throughout California during the mid 1900's, the demand for certain types of public services increased as the number of people living within the state expanded. An analysis of California's migration history, including the vast numbers exiting the dust bowl farms along with other population trends throughout the decade, offers information about the rise and necessity of independent special districts to provide public services to the influx of new arrivals to the state.

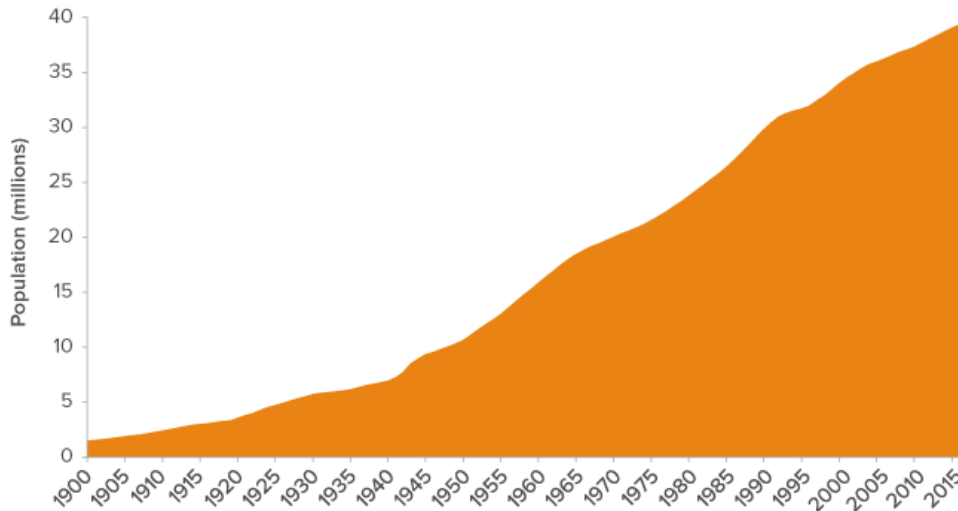


Figure 3.1 California Population: 1900-2015 (Source: California Department of Financial Estimates)

California population increases can be attributed to the westward expansion of the continent as a whole, along with massive migrations to the state during and after the Great Depression. Persons originating from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri compose the largest groups of migrants that relocated to California during the first half of the 20th century. This group of migrants who moved to California between 1910 and 1950 embodies one enormous stream of a broader exodus from the region. By 1950, nearly four million people—23% of all persons born in the states listed above—resided outside the region. More than one-third of them—1,367,720 people—made their new residence California (Gregory, 1989). Academics have contended that the causes of this outflow are rooted in agricultural modernization and the effects of the Great Depression.

There were two distinct migrant streams during the large influx of migrants moving to California in the first half of the 20th century. Since the 1900s, the prominence of most new residents within California had been strongly metropolitan. Most of the Southwesterners who moved to California throughout the first three decades of the century placed Los Angeles as the primary destination, which attracted the largest percentage of interstate and foreign migration,



followed by San Francisco. However, migrants in the 1930s did not follow the same routes to large cities. In a major deviation from previous standard migration patterns, roughly half (48.4%) established residence in nonmetropolitan areas in the state (Gregory, 1989). The variance in where the migrants ultimately ended up settling is rooted within the migrants' previous backgrounds. Individuals from urban areas of the Southwest followed typical patterns to other urban areas in California. Census data demonstrates that 79% of individuals who had previously lived in large Southwest cities in 1935 established residence in Los Angeles, San Francisco, or San Diego (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The endpoints for most migrants from rural backgrounds were different than those of their large urban city counterparts. Like most people, migrant farmers of the Southwest wanted to take up their new residence where they felt most comfortable—in California's agricultural valleys. Approximately 69% of migrants who had previously lived on a farm in 1935 and 50% of migrants who had lived in a small town or city chose to take an alternate migration pattern for agricultural destinations within California. There is a strong correlation between the origins and destinations of migrants who sought to continue their new lives in California. Los Angeles served as a large metropolitan destination for urban migrants, while the San Joaquin Valley drew in rural-oriented migrants.

Come to California and discover the "good life," Americans were told, and they did from every state. California's population doubled every two decades. The wave of migration to the state crested between 1920 and 1930 as more than 2.5 million migrants entered into the state. Throughout America's history, this movement of people to California was the single largest (proportionately) peacetime migration. There is a common misconception that most of the migrants who made their way to California were farmers or those who worked in agriculture and had been devastated by the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. This would lead one to believe that

the large groups of migrant farmers moved only to the agricultural havens such as San Joaquin Valley in California, when in fact, the majority moved to the Los Angeles area. Most of the migrants were not farmers but had originated from the Southwest's towns and cities (Gregory, 1989). Approximately 43% of migrants classified themselves as working in the agricultural sector, which was confirmed by census data (Gregory, 1989). In regard to professions, the migrants resembled the range of statuses typically found in the region they were residing. Nearly 1 out of 6 migrants who came to California were white-collar, professional, or proprietor employees (Gregory, 1989).

The influx of migrants to California during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century placed new residents in established and newly developed cities throughout the state. As the population continued to grow, so did the need for public services. Population increases often lead to greater demands of public services, but this may not always be the case. If a municipality had been established prior to the influx of migrants to the area during the early 1900's, the probability of a special district being established would be low. For instance, a municipality may have already been providing a specific public service that required more funding, personnel, etc., due to the greater demands stemming from the increase of migrants. This would result in the expansion of that specific public service within the municipality rather than the establishment of an entire new governmental entity and jurisdiction with the creation of a special district. Special districts are sometimes even established before a city or town is incorporated, as in the case of the Apple Valley Fire Protection District (AVFPD). The AVFPD was formed in 1951 and originally encompassed 26 square miles that included a few homesteads and small ranches. It was not until much later, in 1988, that the Town of Apple Valley was incorporated as a general law city. Rural areas, such as the High Desert, could not afford an entire fire department, so the establishment of

a fire district allotted the rural residences fire safety and allowed the community to aggregate their resources, giving way to the fire district being able to serve more than just one community. Full-fledged municipalities with early establishments are less likely to have special districts within their boundaries for the reason that established cities are more likely and capable to cope and adapt to the growing demands for greater public services as compared to developing and newly established cities of the 1950s.

### ***Methodology***

To tackle this inquiry into the creation, clustering, and trends of California independent special districts, one must look through multiple lenses. I make use of a multitude of different methodological approaches as I analyze at the county level how California's migration, dispersion of people, and diverse financial structures give rise to an increase, spread, and eventual leveling off of independent special districts. Data pertaining to all 58 counties within California was collected to perform statistical tests on a range of variables including annual gross income (for the county), median income (individual), and registration rates among voters and between the two political parties, Republicans and Democrats. Through statistical and historical analysis, the knowledge regarding California's independent special districts' prevalence, growths, and trends will increase our understanding of local governance and their future.

The economic status among California's 58 counties is notably diverse and varies drastically throughout the state. There is a myriad of variables that could be utilized to analyze the economic status within a given county. For the purpose of this inquiry, two distinctive financial variables were evaluated to better understand the relationship between the prevalence of special districts within the state of California. The annual gross income (AGI) for a given county

represents the total amount of revenue in taxes received by a county, and it can drastically differ between California counties. For example, Los Angeles County has the highest AGI amongst all of California counties and has an AGI for 2017-2018 of \$310,621,984,000. In comparison to Los Angeles County, Glenn County's AGI for the same year was \$578,185,000, which fails to amount to even 1% of Los Angeles County's AGI. Glenn County is not even in the bottom 10 list of counties with the lowest AGI. The discrepancies between these two counties demonstrate clear differences between funding levels and particularly the financial capabilities of California counties.

Another economic variable, which was analyzed to determine the prevalence of special districts among California 58 counties, relates to the financial status of individuals living within a given county. Do counties with wealthier residents have a smaller number of special districts? The general expectation is as follows: As county and local municipalities are able to adequately raise enough revenue to provide the public services without the additional help of special districts, they render the existence of special districts obsolete. Average income earnings throughout the state vary widely. The highest median income county in California rests in Marin County with \$63,110 as compared to the lowest median income of \$24,921 in Imperial County. A simple regression was performed between the median income and the number of special districts within a county.

How one views the government's responsibilities, what services it shall provide, and how these services should be delivered are fundamental questions about the government's role in an individual's life. This question dates back to representative government's earliest forms, including the debates amongst the U.S. founding fathers. The founding of the U.S. Constitution had disputes between proponents of a strong central government by the federalists and a less

intrusive and limited form of government desired by the anti-federalists. The question of the government's role in society, how large a government should be, and what level of government is best and most efficient, is a discussion that has transcended over 200 years and is still a salient issue in present-day politics. How one views government, its functions, and its delivery of services is generally contrasting between political ideologies. Republicans routinely favor a smaller federal and state government and bureaucracy while simultaneously arguing that levels of government that are closer to the people are more efficient, reliable, and accountable. Democrats on the other hand characteristically favor larger government and federal government influences. Do these beliefs in the role and size of government within a society intertwine with the likelihood of the existence of a special district? Regardless of partisan identity, political participation can be activated by either political ideology and is crucial to the establishment of special districts. To achieve the success of establishing a special district, multiple bureaucratic steps and significant local participation and support are required. The establishment of special districts is dependent on political participation, which can be assessed through multiple methods, but registration numbers of a county can shed light on the political engagement between communities.

The final quantitative aspect of the proliferation of special districts broadens the original perspective of solely focusing on California and instead examines all 50 states. The expansion of investigating the prevalence of special districts beyond California and throughout the U.S. will hopefully lead to new findings as to whether special districts have a distinct partisanship. A simple approach was used to account for the effect that population has on the number of districts in a certain state. The total number of special districts throughout the U.S. in 2012 numbered 38,266 (U.S. Census Bureau's Census of Governments, 2012). During 2012, the total U.S.

population numbered 314 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Basic division of these two numbers produces roughly one special district per 8,206 citizens. It would take approximately 121 special districts to account for 1 million citizens. A formula was generated to be able to predict the number of special districts a state should have given its population. The formula is as follows: (2012 Actual State Population)  $\times$  (Number of Special Districts per Person) = The Expected Number of Special Districts. This product is then compared to the actual number of special districts in the state in 2012. The state will either have a surplus or deficit of special districts given its population. To account for the size of the state, one last calculation was conducted. The results were multiplied by 100,000 to determine the surplus or deficit of special districts per 100,000 residents. The formula applied was (Number of Special District Surplus or Deficit of a State) / (State Population)  $\times$  (100,000). A clear example is the state of Nebraska: (1,855,525 Pop)  $\times$  (.000121866 SD per person) = 226 expected special districts. In fact, the number of special districts operating in Nebraska in 2012 was 1,269. This means that the state of Nebraska had a surplus of 1,043 in special districts. Taking the surplus of special districts in Nebraska and dividing by population (1,043 / 1,855,525)  $\times$  100,000 = 56. This indicates that there is a surplus of 56 special districts per 100,000 people in the state of Nebraska.

### ***Results***

Figure 3.2 below shows the bivariate relationship between the annual gross income (AGI) and the number of special districts in California by county. The dependent variable for this statistical analysis is the number of special districts per county, while the independent variable is the AGI for a county. Figure 3.2 shows that when the AGI for a county is low, there is an uneven distribution of special districts. The number of special districts can range from approximately 4

or 5 to over 80, as illustrated by the vertical cluster. California counties that have larger numbers of special districts tend to have lower levels of AGI, with the exception of various outliers such as Los Angeles County. Some counties have moderate levels of special districts as well as average levels of AGI.

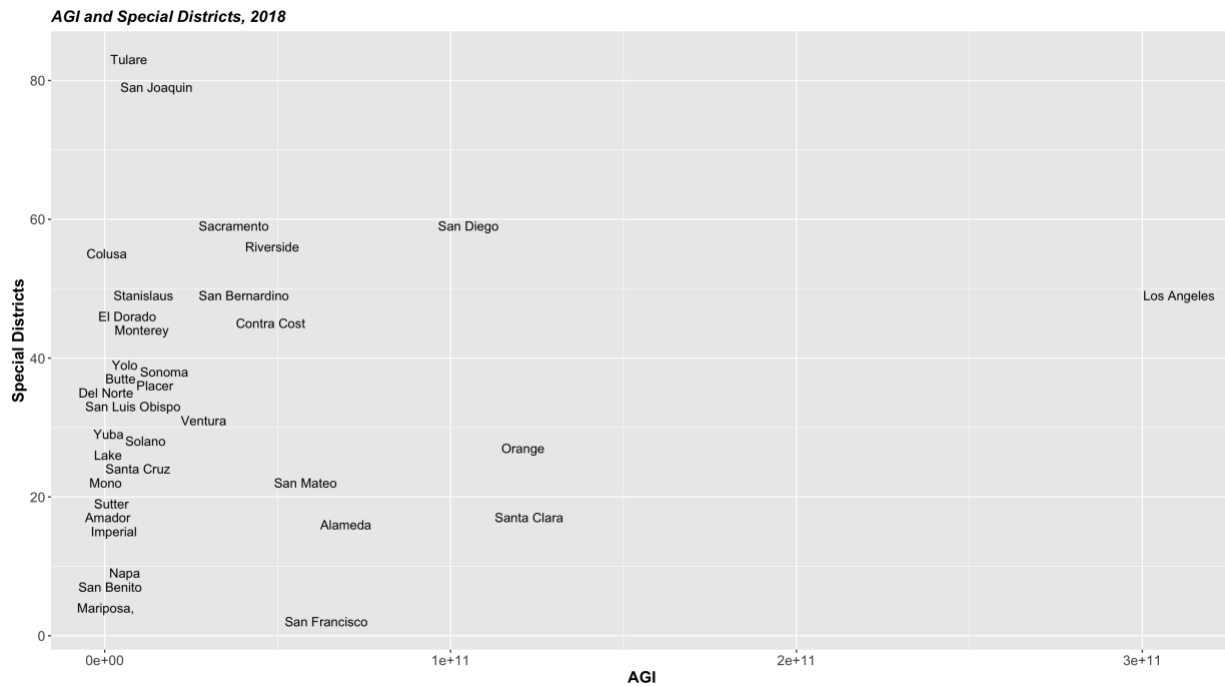


Figure 3.2 AGI and Special Districts

Figure 3.3 shows the bivariate relationship between the median income for a county and the number of special districts within that county. The dependent variable for the statistical analysis performed is the number of special districts per county, while the independent variable is the median income for a county. Figure 3.3 illustrates that counties with an average number of special districts tend to have just below average median incomes. There are more special districts within counties that have lower median incomes, as shown by the cluster on the left-hand side of Figure 3.3. An analysis of special districts should not only be examined through sheer economic and financial aspects but also through a county’s political participation and ideology.

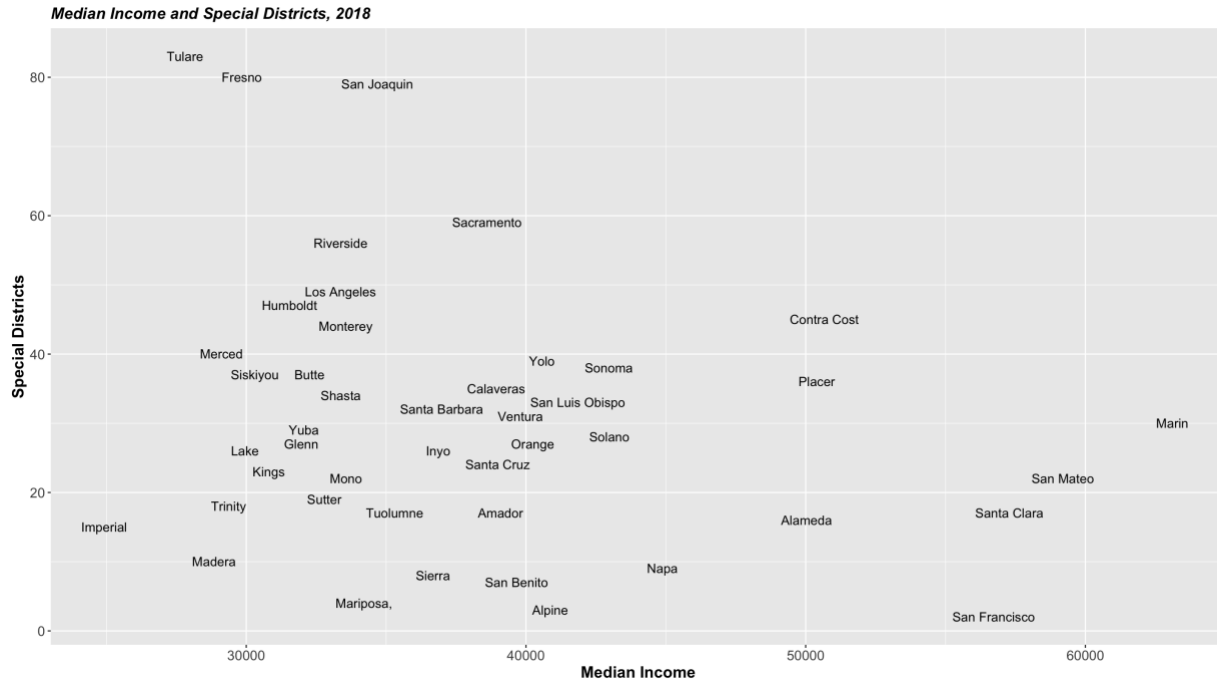


Figure 3.3 Median Income and Special Districts

Figure 3.4 shows the bivariate relationship between the percentage of registered Republicans and the number of special districts within a county. The dependent variable for this statistical analysis is the number of special districts per county, while the independent variable is the percentage of registered Republicans per county. As the number of special districts increases in a given county, we notice more registered Republican voters. Most of those registered voters appear to be in counties with an average or below average number of special districts, with some (16) counties having a higher number of special districts. This figure also suggests that there are more registered Republicans at both high- and low-numbered special district counties. The data is very much dispersed given the relationship between these two variables.



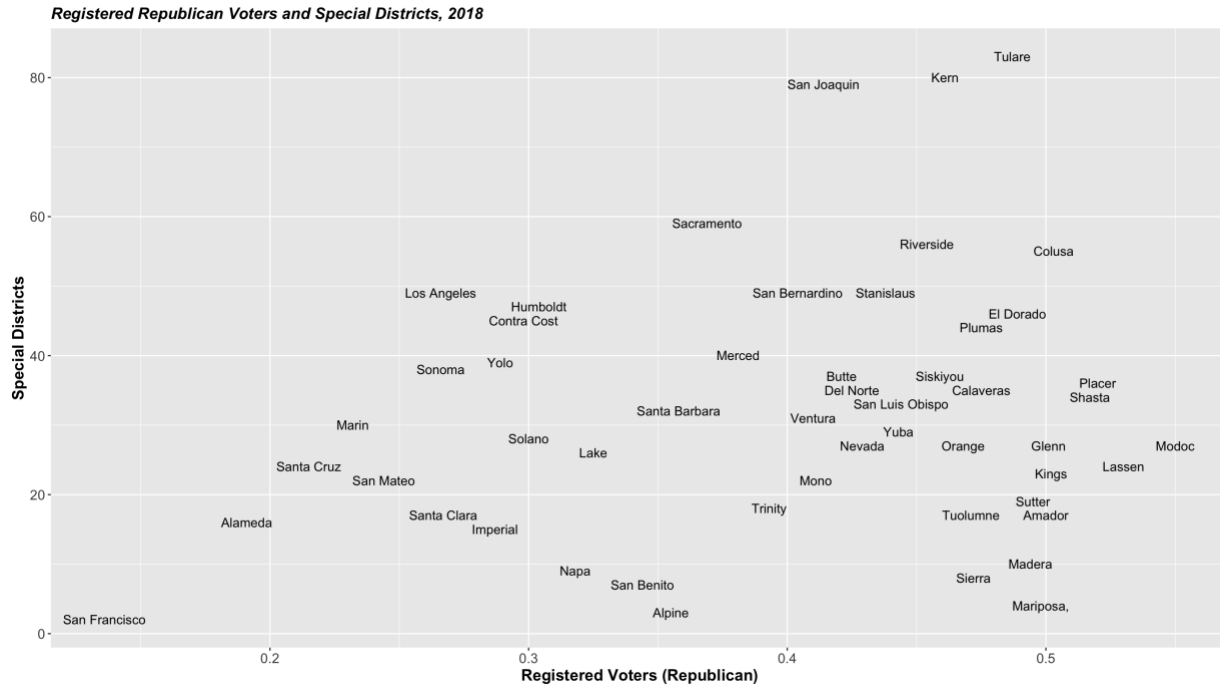


Figure 3.4 Registered Republican Voters and Special Districts

The same statistical analysis was performed for the number of registered Democrats within a given county. Figure 3.5 illustrates the bivariate relationship between the percentage of registered Democrats and the number of special districts within a county. The dependent variable for this statistical analysis is the number of special districts per county, while the independent variable is the percentage of registered Democrats per county. The data cluster in this figure seems to suggest that counties with below average special districts have relatively lower percentages of registered Democrats when compared to registered Republicans in the previous Figure 3.4. However, there are still 18 counties that have an above average number of special districts with an average percentage of registered Democrats.

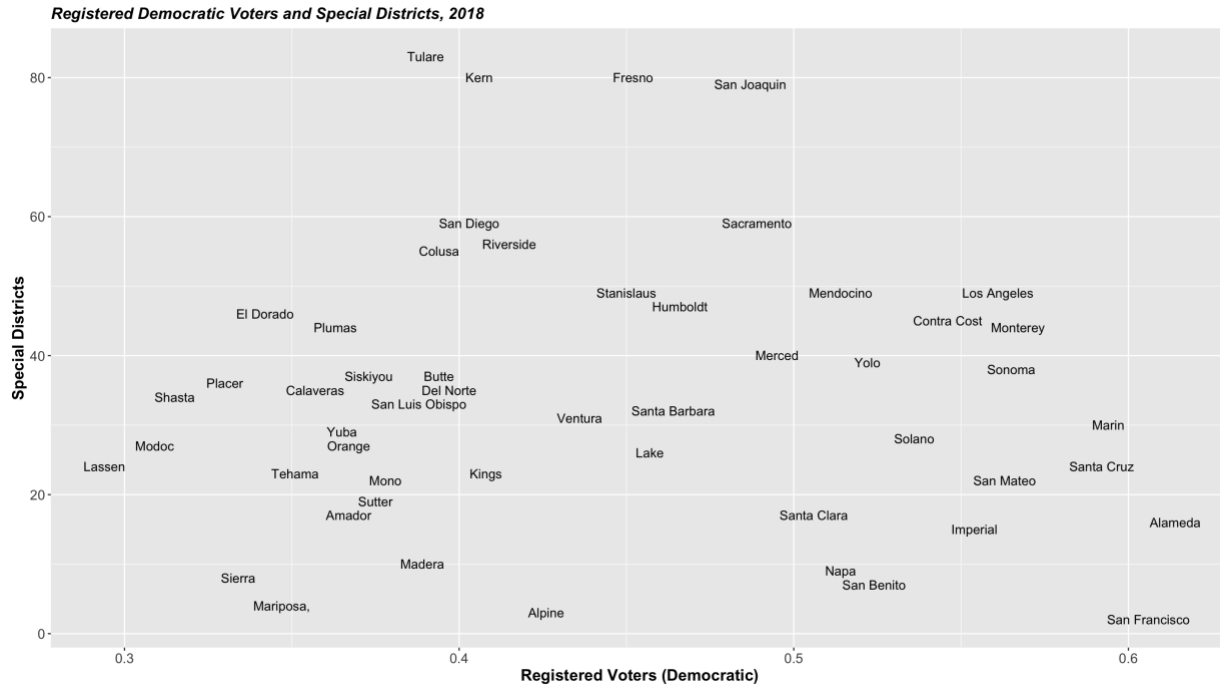


Figure 3.5 Registered Democratic Voters and Special Districts

Figure 3.6 shows the bivariate relationship between the percentage of registered voters and the number of special districts within a county. The dependent variable for this statistical analysis is the number of special districts per county, while the independent variable is the percentage of registered voters for a county. As the number of special districts increases within a county, there are higher percentages of registered voters. The data points are dispersed among different levels of special districts, but there is a slight relationship taking place. The relationship between these two variables is not significant, but there is variation.

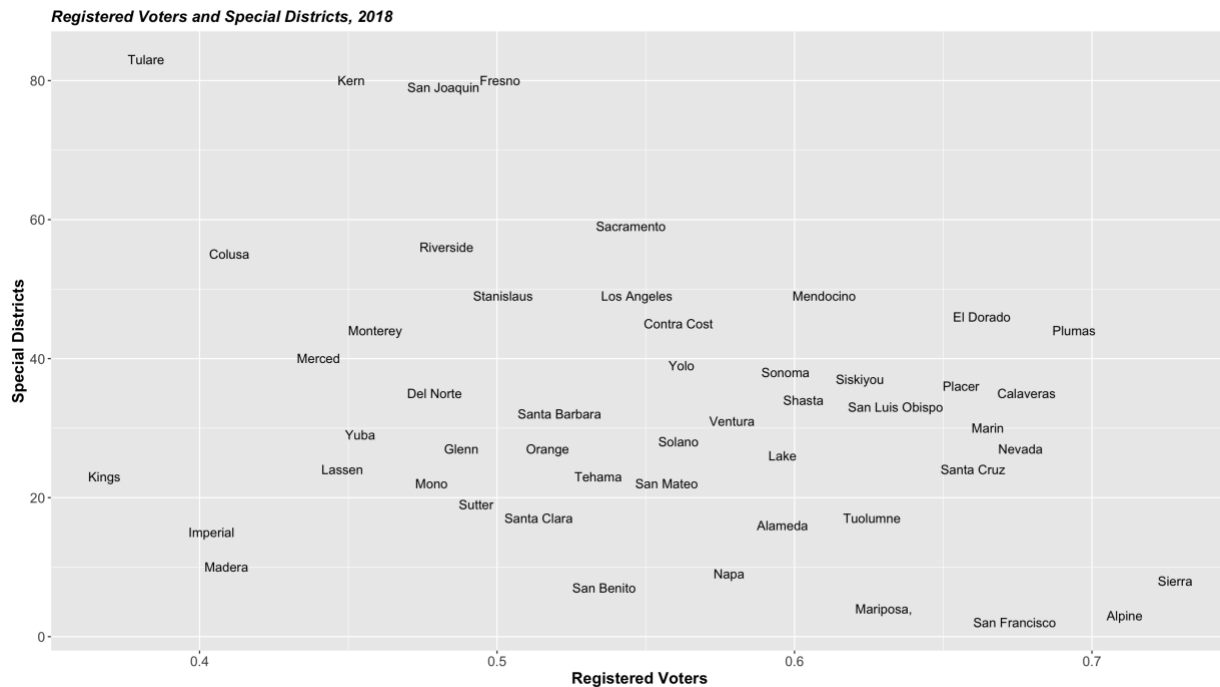


Figure 3.6 Registered Voters and Special Districts

The method approach outlined earlier, controlling for a state’s population utilized was designed to predict the expected number of special districts per state (2012 Actual State Population) × (Number of Special Districts per Person) = The Expected Number of Special Districts. Knowing the expected number of special districts for a state and subtracting it by the actual number of special districts resulted in a surplus or deficit number of special districts for a state. To account for state size in population, the surplus or deficit was divided by a state’s population and multiplied by 100,000. The formula helped determine which states had a surplus of special districts while keeping population equal. The results were noteworthy when the formula was applied to all 50 states. When observing the top 10 states that had a surplus of special districts, 8 out of 10 were considered conservative based on the Romney vote share in the 2012 presidential elections. The two states that were considered liberal in the top 10 states with surpluses, Colorado and New Mexico, were won by Obama in the 2012 election (Colorado 51% and New Mexico 53%). It should be noted that Colorado is often considered a swing state. The

state with the largest number of special districts in the U.S., Illinois (3,227), did not make the top 10 states with a surplus. In addition, a thought-provoking attribute of the same model regards the partisan preference of the bottom 10 states with the largest deficit of special districts. Six out of 10 states that had the largest deficits of special districts per 100,000 residents were considered liberal, based on the Romney vote share. The state that had the largest deficit of special districts was Hawaii (-11 special districts per 100,000 residents). See Figure 3.7 and Figure 3.8 for top 10 surpluses and deficits of special districts per 100,000 residents by state.

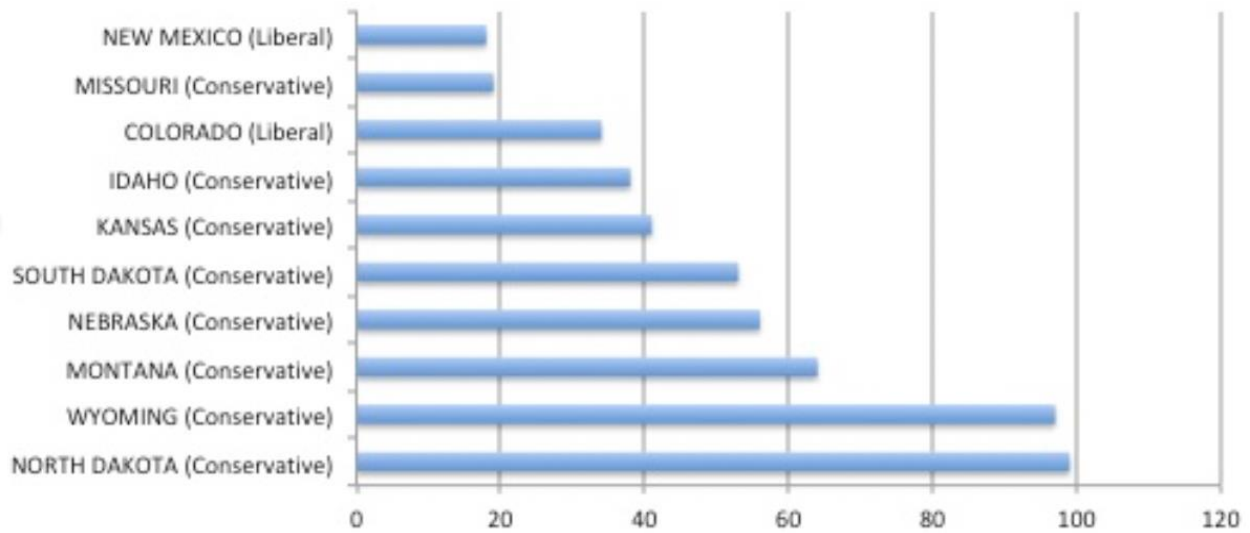


Figure 3.7 Surpluses of Special Districts Per 100,000 Population

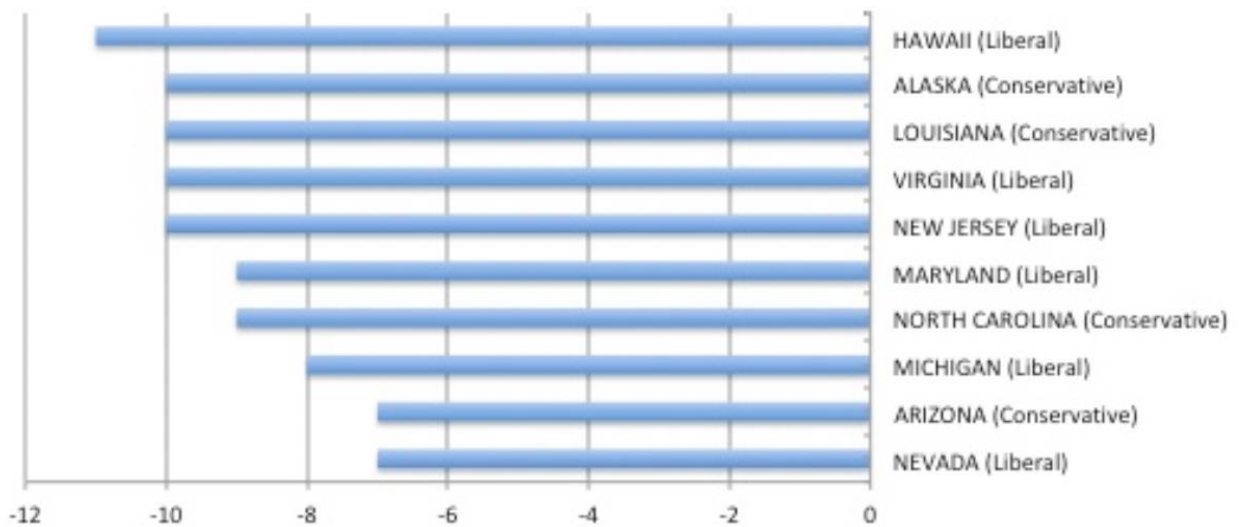


Figure 3.8 Deficits of Special Districts Per 100,000 Population

## *Discussion*

The expansion of special districts as an instrument to provide public services to residents through a local government organization has leveled off in California, while expansion continues to increase nationally. The inquiry of this study began questioning whether certain ideological and partisan preferences of California counties might induce a county to create more special districts. As the study developed, more variables started to become apparent, such as the various economic variables entwined with special districts, which necessitated observation and testing to determine other alternative explanations as to where higher frequencies of special districts are found. An investigation into the clustering and trends of special districts in California were systematically tested by way of both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. The results of this study will provide new insight into where special districts are regularly established and utilized. Testing numerous variables amongst the 58 counties in California allowed for expectations to be confirmed as well as rejected. An additional statistical analysis was used, broader in scope, to test the number of special districts in a particular state within the U.S. while keeping the state's population constant and evaluating the state's partisan disposition. Following is a discussion of the findings and conclusion from the statistical analyses and study. Subsequent the discussion section is the conclusion with the researcher's recommendations and points for further research areas that can be studied concerning special districts and their prevalence in California and throughout the U.S.

The first analysis dealing with the spread of special districts in California focused on the fluctuations of immigration to the state throughout its history. The general expectation is as follows: As more individuals immigrated to California throughout the 20th century, the demand

for more public services also increased. It is suspected that areas in California, which had not yet fully developed their municipality services, had a much higher tendency of establishing special districts capable of providing specific public services for new residents. It is in lieu of the lack of public services being provided by cities and towns where special districts were employed as alternatives to municipalities as vehicles capable of providing the desired public services to their residents. An exploration of California's migration history, including the vast numbers escaping the dust bowl farms along with other population trends throughout the decade, offered information regarding the rise and necessity of independent special districts to provide public services to the influx of new arrivals to the state.

Work opportunities, the relief system, and the climate were the motivations that led millions of people to immigrate to California, especially during and after the Great Depression. An additional factor leading individuals from the Southwest to move to California was the personal ties to relatives already living and working in California. The migrants who had already taken up residency and employment in California began to send hopeful letters detailing how well they were doing, which helped initiate the migration process (Gregory, 1989). California's population in 1930 was 5.71 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). By the year 1970, California population had nearly quadrupled, totaling 20 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The rapid growth California experienced was greater than any other state's influx of migrants and brought millions of new residents to cities and towns throughout the state. This rush of incoming migrants to less developed and developing municipalities were not yet capable of providing the public services needed by their new residents. Figure 3.9<sup>4</sup> charts the type of special district and the year it was established from 1855-2016, and we can observe the special districts being

<sup>4</sup> See page 123 for Figure 3.9 District Type by Year Established (1855-2016).

created throughout all 58 counties in correspondence with the increase of migrants into the state. These migrants sought specific public services; however, the established municipalities were not capable of providing such services, so in turn the new residents began to establish special districts as a method to receive the desired public services.

Another competing expectation regarding the spread of special districts throughout California concerns itself with the variety of economic issues leading to the establishment of special districts as a method of delivering a single public service to residents. Two economic variables were statistically tested regarding their possible impacts on the creation and establishment of special districts. The annual gross income (AGI)—the total amount of revenue in taxes received by a county—was tested alongside the median income for individuals living in a county. The general expectation is that wealthier counties, either by means of AGI or individual incomes, will make use of special districts at lesser rates for the reason that their municipalities are receiving sufficient funding levels through taxes to provide the public service desired by their residents. The number of special districts can range dramatically from 4 or 5 to over 80, as illustrated by the vertical cluster seen in Table 3.1. California counties that have greater numbers of special districts often have lower levels of AGI, with the exception of various outliers such as Los Angeles County. Most counties have moderate levels of special districts accompanied by average levels of AGI. The median income variable effects were minimal but more evident than the variable AGI. When testing for the effects of median income on the number of special districts, counties with an average number of special districts tended to have just below average median incomes. Counties that had lower levels of median income were on average to have greater numbers of special districts in use. Although both statistical tests resulted without statistically significant correlations, the analysis did provide suggestive evidence that

wealthier areas are less likely to establish and make use of special districts as methods to provide public services to its residents. More research is needed focusing on the levels of wealth in different municipalities to determine the likelihood of a special district being present.

Another point of consideration while testing for variables that could affect the number of special districts in a given county focused on partisan preferences and political participation. The three political variables—the percentage of registered Republicans, Democrats, and registered voters for a given county—were statistically tested to determine their possible influences on the creation and establishment of special districts. Conservative Republicans have long championed the idea that smaller government is a better and preferred form of government. They believe that small governments can produce and deliver the responsibilities bestowed upon them in an efficient manner and in a more intimate setting that is closer to the people. Liberal Democrats tend to be categorized as establishing big government, in favor of large bureaucracies, and having a mentality of “government knows best” for the people. The expectation is that higher percentages of registered Republicans in a given county will produce higher numbers of special districts, while higher percentages of registered Democrats in a county will yield lower numbers of special districts. The data pertaining to the number of special districts and percentage of Republican voters is very much dispersed given the relationship between these two variables. As the number of special districts increases in a given county, we notice more registered Republican voters. But Table 3.3 also suggests that there are more registered Republicans at both high- and low-numbered special district counties. The results from testing the percentage of registered Democrats and the number of special districts are of similar fashion and inconclusive. The statistical analysis suggests that counties with below average special districts have relatively lower percentages of registered Democrats as compared to registered Republicans. However,



there are still 18 counties with an above average number of special districts and an average percentage of registered Democrats.

The last political variable analyzed for special districts in California was the percentage of registered voters in a county. The establishment of a special district involves many different bureaucratic requirements, support, participation by local residents, and a final vote by the residents approving the creation of a special district. The expectation is that special districts are more prevalent in counties that have higher levels of registered voters, no matter the partisan composition. As the number of special districts increase within a county, there are higher percentages of registered voters. The data points are distributed among different quantities of special districts, but there is a slight relationship taking place. The relationship between these two variables is not statistically significant, but there is variation.

The level of analysis within this study predominantly focused on the 58 California counties, but an additional, broader scope evaluation of special districts at the national level provided new understandings of the pervasiveness of special districts. The frequency of the use of special districts as a preferred method of government in delivering public services has continued to grow. The growth of special districts has outpaced the rate of population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Special districts continue to increase in numbers across all 50 states and aggregately have never seen a decline. Parallel to the line of reasoning earlier articulated when examining California counties and partisanship, Republicans characteristically favor smaller-sized government accompanied by a small bureaucracy, while Democrats typically favor larger forms of government and federal government influences. The expectation is that conservative Republican states will have higher numbers of special districts. Both of the partial correlations conducted resulted in statistically non-significant correlations. However, when calculating the

surplus and deficits of special districts per 100,000 residents by state, this method concluded that 8 out of the top 10 special district surpluses were conservative-leaning states. Likewise, 6 out of the top 10 states having special district deficits were liberal-leaning states. Special districts are continuing to grow throughout the nation, but there does not seem to be an empirically distinct number developing in conservative states. Moreover, there were 24 states that had a surplus, 25 that had a deficit, and one state that broke even (Connecticut). Of those 24 with a surplus, 13—a little over half—were labeled as conservative states. After dissecting the results from the analysis, we can reject the possibility that partisanship preference (conservative or liberal) of a state does not have an effect on the number of special districts being established and functioning in that state.

### ***Conclusion***

Special districts have been a part of the woven fabric of the United States' federalism form of government, dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when they were first conceived as park districts (The Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, 1964). Since the establishment of special districts, the U.S. has continued to opt to implement almost innumerable numbers of special districts as a form of government to provide public services. While nationally the number of special districts continues to increase, the number of special districts in California has leveled off. The exploration of this study began questioning whether certain ideological and partisan preferences of California counties might provoke a county to create more or less special districts. As the study grew, more variables both political and economic in nature became obvious for exploration, which demanded observation and testing to determine possible alternative explanations of where higher frequencies of special districts are found. A

multifaceted approach making use of historical data and records coupled with quantitative methods allowed for a systematic evaluation of the clustering and trends of special districts in California and the U.S.

Although the results of this study were not statistically significant with regard to the exact variables that bring about the establishment of special districts, the findings do offer new insights into some of the common attributes and characteristics of the places where special districts are regularly being established and utilized in California. There are numerous difficulties present in investigating the shared variables leading to the creation of a special district, specifically time. This study's analysis was only able to capture a given county's current economic or political composition, whereas the actual economic or political composition may have been different during the creation of a special district. There was indeed a drastic increase of special districts being generated throughout 1930 and 1970, but each specific case has its own individual and unique characteristics, rendering it extremely difficult to study and test each case. Future research may try to select individual case studies as points of research so that the researcher may be able to explore a deeper historical, political, and economic perspective specific to each special district in their study. From there, researchers may be able to statistically compare case studies to provide evidence of the variables that lead a community to develop and establish special districts in California.

In regard to the perspective on the national increase of special districts, I would argue that the trend of continual rate increases because special districts may be the preferred form of government to deliver public services at the local level. An additional effect augmenting this increase in special districts would be the financial constraints placed on cities, towns, and counties (Maynard, 2013). State governments have made it more difficult for general-purpose

governments to be able to provide the public services requested by its people. The public is fond of having a more direct control over their government, and special districts permit this oversight of public services.

It is evident that there may not be a definite distinction between conservative and liberal states and their preference of the use of special districts to deliver public services. Further research is needed in respect to special districts, for there is a lack of prominent and diverse research being conducted. Examining the dynamics and effects of special districts is vital to understanding how present-day local governments operate. Even though special districts are greater in number compared to general-purpose governments and are considered the fastest growing form of government in the U.S., there is little to no exploration of their performance and efficacy. The question still persists as to which states are opting to implement special districts at higher rates, and why they do so. What are the common variable(s) among states with the highest rates of special districts? Why do states such as Hawaii and Alaska have the largest deficits of special districts per 100,000 residents, and why do states such as North Dakota and Wyoming have such large surpluses? All four are rural states with limited populations but conclude differing results. These issues require further attention so that we may better understand why the phenomenon of an increase of special districts as a preferred form of government is proliferating at such high rates across most of the United States.

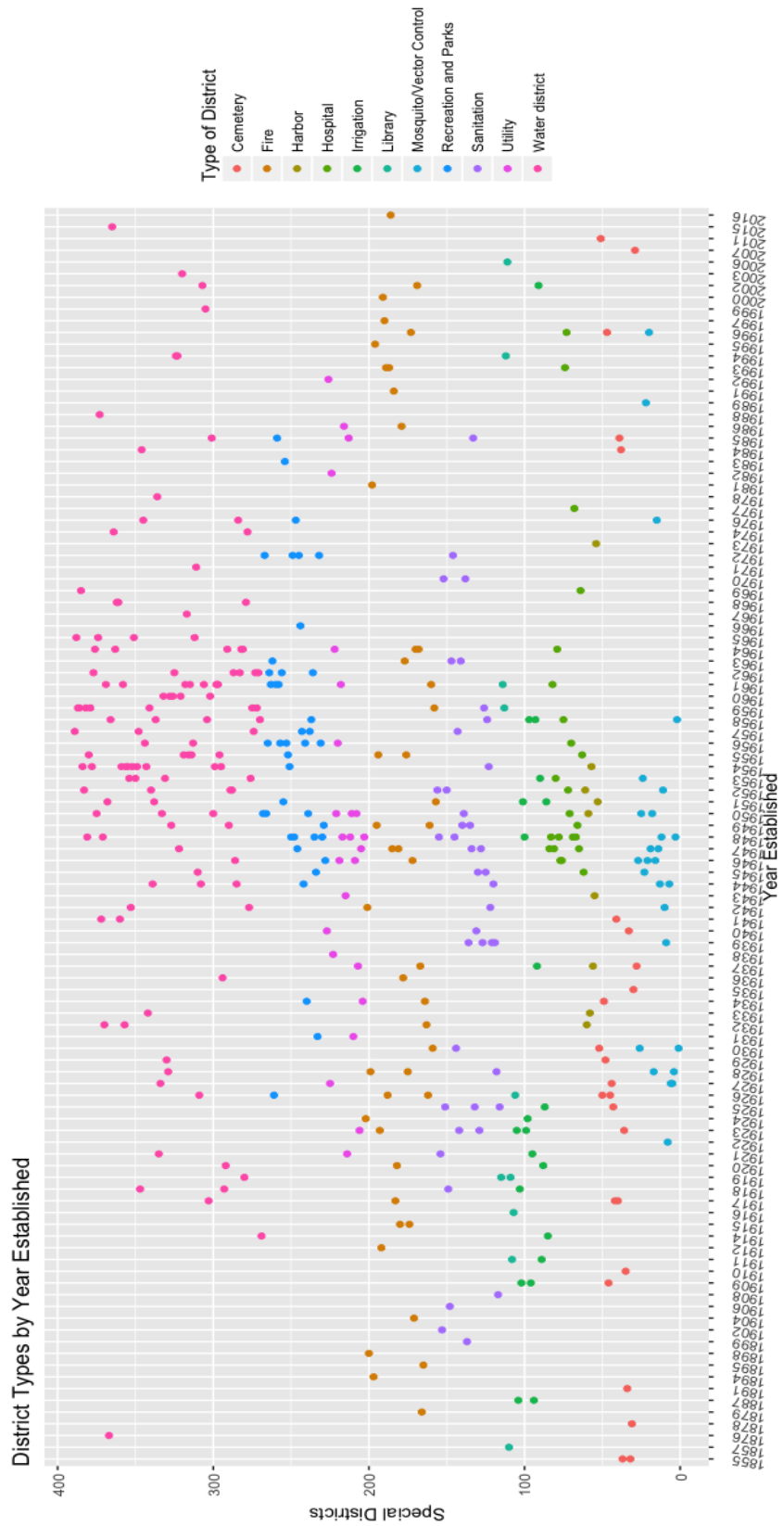


Figure 3.9 District Type by Year Established (1855-2016)

## CHAPTER 4

Conclusion:

This research sought to investigate a variety of points of research regarding California special districts in depth. The conclusions rendered from this study follow the research questions and the findings and address aspects of special districts including accountability, representation, composition, voting behavior, and general trends. The information acquired through this research of special districts will provide new knowledge pertaining to the topics listed above, as well as offer a reference for original research to build upon and continue to grow our understanding of special districts. The conclusions from these three studies offer insight, not just into future research concentrating on local government and representation, but also into public policy research and local government practitioners. The methodological approaches used throughout the three research cases made use of both quantitative and qualitative practices through advanced statistical analysis, in-depth interviews, and surveys. Applying an array of methodological tools helped unmask many of the unknowns regarding special districts and allowed for the validity of the claims to be supported by statistical evidence and interview data. As special districts remain the most typical form of government in California and U.S., it is vital to continue researching their effects on representation, efficiency, and growth as an instrument of government to provide public services to residents. This research inquiry originated with a focus on the divergence between the selection methods of special district board directors and culminated with several significant findings concerning representation and accountability.

The initial research inquiry set forth to explore and examine the principal-agent relationships and inherent differences between appointed and elected independent special district board directors in California. The results from this study emerged with five major findings: (1) A majority of appointed special district board directors admitted to having a prior or existing relationship with a city council member(s) or county board of supervisor(s) preceding their

appointment to the special district board. (2) Appointed special district board directors often do not communicate regularly with the city council member(s) and county board of supervisor(s) (principals) who appointed them to their special district board. (3) Both appointed and elected special district boards share the same common difficulties of selecting district leadership. (4) The principal-agent relationship theory did not apply to the majority of appointed special district board directors, while the principal-agent theory for elected special district board directors proved to be accurate. (5) The public participation levels for both appointed and elected special district boards remain low. The findings from the research are a product of completing 25 in-depth, elite interviews with currently serving special district board directors throughout California. Although the special district board directors who participated in the study offered open and frank answers to the questions posed, further research is still necessary. Future research may want to duplicate this study to strengthen or dispute its claims, as well as obtain interviews from special district board directors who sit on utility, recreation and parks, and sanitation districts, as they were not represented among the interview participants. Other areas of future research may want to focus the scope of their study by concentrating on specific types of special districts or broaden their scope by analyzing special district board directors serving in all 50 states.

A natural progression of the research inquiry shifted the focus from appointed versus elected special district board directors to the composition, characteristics, and political experience and ambitions of board directors. Researchers frequently overlook special districts. Establishing information regarding voting behavior and elections, decision-making, and the overall demographic composition of special district board directors is crucial in creating general knowledge about the topic. A survey was used to collect data about demographics, political



experience, and political aspirations. The survey was distributed via email to 458 currently serving California special district board directors and attained a 29% response rate with 135 responses collected. The research study sought to discover whether special districts were serving a purpose for two distinct groups of public officials. The first general expectation presented a claim stating special districts are regularly used as stepping-stones for novice public officials lacking political experience who are seeking higher political offices. Conversely, an alternate plausible account argued that special districts were not vehicles for political advancement by political newcomers, but rather a final resting place for well-versed local politicians seeking to continue to participate in public policy. A significant majority (63%) of special district board directors did not possess any prior political experience before serving on their current special district boards. Three-quarters (76%) professed that they did not have an interest in seeking any other political offices. Future research may seek to test the assumption made in the study, which argues that a majority of special district board directors do not seek other political offices, because an overwhelming majority are over the age of 55 and prefer to participate in a part-time political office rather than a higher political office, which requires much more time and resources. However, nearly a quarter (24%) affirmed that they have interests serving in other types of political offices, notably city council, county board of supervisors, and state assembly.

The case study of the AVFPD election of 2018 presented an opportunity to investigate and provide findings about local elections and voting behavior within special districts. Data, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, allowed for a reliable depiction of the events that took place throughout this specific special district election. Interviews from all four candidates were obtained, along with data regarding the single interest group involved in the election, the AVPFA. The incumbents chose not to participate in any fundraising events, while the challengers opted to

hold fundraisers and receive financial support and endorsements from the AVPFA. The AVPFA officially endorsed and contributed \$23,970 (total) to both challengers in the election. Financial documents from the San Bernardino County Registrar of Voters show that the AVPFA had expenditures for both challengers for campaign signs, mailers, and candidate statements. The incumbent candidates did not possess any campaign signs, mailers, or candidate statements. The expenditures made by AVPFA allowed the challengers to aid voters make decisions by offering political information at a low transaction cost to the voters. The political information made possible by the AVPFA for the challengers acted as a heuristic for the voters, while the incumbents did not provide any political information. A single motivated group, the AVPFA, was able to disproportionately affect the outcome of the election for the reason that there were no other counter-balancing interest groups. This phenomenon necessitates further research as to its pervasiveness among special district elections. Further research may also consider exploring other elections in which an organized union represents employees from the special district in order to investigate the impacts on special district elections.

As special districts have been a part of the governing structure of the U.S. since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and California after the passage of the Wright Act (1887), they have been seen as efficient instruments that provide a single public service to residents. Questions regarding the commonness of special districts have attracted numerous research inquiries (MacManus 1981; Bollens 1987; Nelson 1990; Barns 1994; McCabe 2000; Feoick and Carr 2001), but it remains highly debated as to where special districts are likely to be established. The study began testing whether certain ideological and partisan preferences of California counties affected the likelihood of special districts being established in those counties. The study included additional political and economic variables that were statistically tested and concluded without statistically

significant results. It is suggested from this research that the growth of special districts can be partially attributed to the influx of migrants stemming from the Southwest from 1930 through 1970. A broader scope was applied to the study to allow for a statistical analysis, which would test the prevalence and partisanship of special districts in the U.S. While there were no statistically significant results from the national level of analysis, 8 of the top 10 states with special district surpluses were conservative states, and 6 out of the top 10 states with special district deficits were liberal states. Further research is needed to test special districts' efficacy and performance. An additional study could also focus specifically on an individual state and compare the results to this study. Nonetheless, the overriding question about what common variable(s) are needed to have a special district be established still persists.

As the study comes to a close, one should not forget the significant impacts that local politics have on the lives of millions. Special districts provide first responders when our lives or properties are at risk in the form of fire protection districts. They provide clean water for consumption that is used daily by all in the form of water districts. They provide economic support in the form of harbor and port districts for communities that are reliant on international commerce. Special districts were created as a form of government to help provide a desired public service and have proliferated throughout all 50 states. This research sought to help provide new understanding about the usually obscure form of government known as special districts. Paradoxically, special districts are the most predominant form of government in the California and the U.S., but research concerning their establishments and effects is rarely studied. This research sheds new light on special districts and will hopefully spark new interest and debate continuing the vital dialogue concerning local governance. The three studies were a collaborative effort and could not have been possible without the participation from the

numerous California special district board directors who provided honest, candid responses throughout the interview and survey processes. It is with great hope that this study will be one of many in the future that learns from others' distinguished research and provides greater knowledge and understanding to a little-known type of government that affects us all—special districts.

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